MO XIANG TONG XIU

Heaven Official's Blessing

2

TIAN GUAN CI FU

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Heaven Official's Blessing
TIAN GUAN CI FU
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Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

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Chapter 12:
In the Palace of Divine Might, Crown Prince Meets Crown Prince

XIE LIAN KNEW this ring must have been left behind by Hua Cheng. He held it in his hand and wondered for a moment, *What could this be?*

When Xie Lian was still an esteemed crown prince, he grew up in the Palace of Xianle. The Kingdom of Xianle had always reveled in beautiful, precious objects. Collectors who held aesthetics above all else were abundant, and the palace itself was of course glorious and dazzling. Golden columns, jaded steps, innumerable treasures, and precious jewels—the noble children even played with colored gems as if they were toys. Xie Lian was thus familiar with the sight of riches, and from the look of this ring, it appeared to be made of diamond. But its shape was exquisite—even the most skilled jeweler likely couldn't craft an equal to the ethereal natural beauty it emanated. Moreover, of all the diamonds he had ever seen, this stone was extraordinarily clear, shimmering like a crystal, fascinating and sublime. That scintillating luster made it difficult for him to determine exactly what kind of stone it could be.

Still, even if he couldn't tell what the ring was made of, it was certainly an item of extreme significance. If it was found around his neck, then it had clearly not been accidentally dropped. It was most likely a gift from Hua Cheng, a keepsake.

Xie Lian was a little surprised to receive a memento like this, and he smiled softly. He resolved to take good care of it and to ask the youth what the gift meant the next time they met. All he owned was this broken-down shrine, and in it there was nowhere appropriate for him to hide treasure. After giving it some thought, he decided the best place to keep it was on his person after all. And thus, Xie Lian fastened the silver chain around his neck once more.

After running around Mount Yujun and Banyue Pass back-to-back, Xie Lian lay paralyzed in Puqi Shrine for a few days. If it wasn't for the kindness of some overly passionate villagers who came with offerings of buns and congee, he would’ve probably stayed incapacitated for many days more. He spent his time thus, until one day, a sudden message arrived from Ling Wen: Return to the heavens at once.

Judging by her tone, something bad was about to go down. Xie Lian could guess more or less what it was and was already mentally prepared.

“Is this about Banyue Pass?”

“That’s right,” Ling Wen replied. “When you’ve returned to the heavens, come directly to the Palace of Divine Might.”

Upon hearing “Palace of Divine Might,” Xie Lian froze. Jun Wu was back.

Since his third ascension, he hadn’t yet seen Jun Wu. As the number one martial god, Jun Wu spent his days deep in secluded cultivation or out patrolling the realms and keeping the world at peace. With his return, it looked as though Xie Lian wouldn’t be able to get out of making this trip. And so, after only a few days of rest, he hiked up to the Heavenly Capital once more.

The divine palaces of all manner of gods and immortals had been built in the Heavenly Capital, each with their own history and style. Together, they formed the great city. There were sculpted pillars and muraled buildings here, little bridges and streams there. There was a transcendent ambience in the air, and clouds diffused beneath one’s feet.

The Heavenly Court had a single main road: the Grand Avenue of Divine Might. Although there were many such roads built in honor of Jun Wu in the Mortal Realm, such mortal monuments were but a hollow mimicry of their true form in the heavens. Only this road in the Heavenly Court was the true Grand Avenue of Divine Might. Xie Lian walked on down the expansive road and headed toward the Palace of Divine Might. En route, there were many heavenly officials hurrying along, but not a single one dared acknowledge him.

Truthfully, there were not many to begin with who would acknowledge him when he visited the Heavenly Court. However, “not acknowledge” meant no fellow officials would approach and walk with him or initiate any conversation, but they would still nod in greeting and give him basic due courtesy. But now they were pretending he wasn’t there at all, as if a single glance at him would get them in trouble. If they were in front of him, they would hurry away. If they were behind him, they would slow their pace, leaving him a wide berth, desperately hoping his feet would carry him meters away from them.

Xie Lian had gotten used to this sort of treatment long ago, so he didn't think anything of it. After all, he did just drag down the mighty, newly ascended General Pei Junior. It would be stranger if no one stayed away. Yet unexpectedly, as he walked, a voice suddenly called out from behind him.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian was amazed at the call and thought whoever had dared address him truly had commendable courage. But when he turned his head to look, the junior official that called for That Highness rushed past him and ran toward someone farther ahead.

He called as he ran, "Honestly, Your Highness! How could you forget your identity medallion when heading to the Palace of Divine Might? How would you even get in?"

Only then did it dawn on Xie Lian—of course the address "Your Highness" wasn't directed at him. There were quite a few crown princes in the heavens, so some confusion on this matter wasn't anything unusual.

Yet when he glanced over and his eyes landed on the other crown prince, he paused.

That young man had strong brows, bright eyes, and a wide smile. This smile was vastly different from those of many other heavenly officials: it was pure and sincere, and added an air of childlike innocence to his handsome face. Although, if a less charitable official like Mu Qing provided comment, they would probably call it an air of foolishness.

The young man was dressed in armor and looked exceptionally heroic. However, it didn't give him the air of a warrior, of blood and battle. Rather, it gave him an air of royal nobility, candid and radiant.

Xie Lian froze mid-step and stared at the young man. The two in front sensed his gaze and turned back to face him. When the junior official saw who it was, his face dropped immediately. Xie Lian lightly inclined his head and smiled at him.

"Greetings, Your Highness."

The other crown prince was obviously the type who didn't mind the everyday details and didn't recognize his face, so when he saw someone greeting him, he immediately returned the sentiment with a brilliant smile. He shouted back, "Greetings!"

The junior official beside him gave him a subtle push. "Come on, Your Highness, let's go. We still need to get to the Palace of Divine Might."

The young man, completely oblivious, could not understand why his subordinate would shove him so suddenly. He wondered aloud, "Why are you pushing me?"

Xie Lian puffed out a laugh and that junior official pushed even harder, urging, "The Emperor is probably already waiting for us. Please, let's go, Your Highness!"

The other crown prince could only give Xie Lian a confused look before turning to leave.

Xie Lian stayed where he was as they walked away, and soon, distant whispers from lower-ranking officials floated to his ears.

"…Well, that was awkward. The world is such a small place."

"They're both officials in the heavens, it was only a matter of time that they met. If you ask me, General Nan Yang bumping into General Xuan Zhen is a more exciting affair."

"Ha ha, what's the rush? They'll all be coming face-to-face soon! Everyone's gathering at the Palace of Divine Might, aren't they?"

Suddenly, someone commented, "It's not just a small world—take a look at those two. I don't like to make the comparison, but even though they're both crown princes, His Highness Tai Hua is truly noble. He would never do anything shameful like *that*, even if he fell from grace."

"The Kingdom of Yong'an was more prosperous than the Kingdom of Xianle, so of course the Crown Prince of Yong'an is stronger than that of Xianle. How the grass grows depends on the land it grew on. Simple logic."

The martial god who watched over the north was Pei Ming of the Palace of Ming Guang. The Martial God of the West was Quan Yizhen of the Palace of Qi Ying. The Martial God of the Southeast was Feng Xin of the Palace of Nan Yang, and the Martial God of the Southwest was Mu Qing of the Palace of Xuan Zhen.

And the martial god watching over the east was Lang Qianqiu of the Palace of Tai Hua.

When Lang Qianqiu was still mortal, he was a crown prince like Xie Lian. Not just that—he was the Crown Prince of Yong'an. The Kingdom of Yong'an was the country that overtook Xianle after its fall, and the founder of Yong'an was the rebel general who successfully overthrew the imperial capital of Xianle.

While Xie Lian drifted in the Mortal Realm, he had also visited the east, so naturally he knew that the Crown Prince of Yong'an had ascended. As heavenly officials, it was inevitable that they would run into each other, so he didn't think much of it. Those gossiping junior officials, while they were supposedly whispering, weren't particularly quiet. If their prattling had been about anyone else, they might have been more wary of being overheard, but since this was Xie Lian, they spoke without fear of him hearing. Perhaps they even found the prospect exciting. So Xie Lian pretended to have heard nothing and casually walked away.

Just then, another voice came from behind and called out, "Your Highness!"

Not again, Xie Lian thought. But this time when he turned his head, it was someone who really was addressing him.

Ling Wen, with dark-circled eyes and arms full of scrolls, approached him. "Everyone has gone to the Palace of Divine Might for the meeting. Be mindful once you reach the hall."

Of course Xie Lian was aware of the situation. "What do you think General Pei Junior's sentence will be?"

"Exile, probably," Ling Wen replied.

That's actually not too bad. Not too severe, Xie Lian thought.

Exile was considered a temporary banishment for officials who had committed crimes, meaning the length of punishment was negotiable, and there might still be the opportunity to resume their duty. If they were found to be on their best behavior, they might one day get fished back up; maybe in thirty to fifty years, maybe in a hundred or two hundred years. But to Xie Lian, this “not too bad” was of course based on his own standards. To General Pei, it would be a completely different story.

Xie Lian remembered another thing. “Oh yeah. Ling Wen, how goes the search for the boy with the Human Face Disease from Mount Yujun, the one I told you about last time? Do you have any news?”

“I’m very sorry, Your Highness. I don’t have anything at the moment. We’ll work harder on it,” Ling Wen replied.

Even for a heavenly official, finding a single person in such a vast world was not an easy task. Although the heavens might make faster work of it than mortals, it was still more like ten years for the Mortal Realm versus one year for the heavens.

Xie Lian thus said, “Thank you for your hard work.”

By this point, they reached the end of the avenue, and a majestic palace came into view before them.

The palace had stood through the ages, yet it showed only enduring excellence and none of its antiquity. Interwoven glazed tiles adorned the golden roof, layer upon layer, blinding in their scintillation. Xie Lian looked up and glanced at where “Palace of Divine Might” was written beneath the golden roof. The characters, written with power and with vigor, were exactly the same as they were centuries ago, unchanged. He lowered his head and stepped into the hall. Within, numerous heavenly officials had already gathered, either in groups of two or three, or by their lonesome, standing in silence.

The only ones permitted to enter this hall were heavenly officials who had officially ascended—all imperial sons of heavens or indomitable overlords, each bursting with spiritual might. They eyed each other in silent pride and judgment, their splendor overwhelming. Gathered here, at this time and place, everyone held their breaths and did not dare utter a sound.

Upon the throne at the very end of the hall, there sat a martial god clad in white armor.

This martial god had a handsome face, and with his eyes closed and his lips unspeaking, he appeared extremely poised and solemn. Behind him stood the expanse of the magnificent Palace of Divine Might, and beneath his feet there were pure-white snowy peaks.

As if sensing that Xie Lian had entered the hall, he opened his eyes.

Those eyes were obsidian-black, but bright and clear, as if formed by the melted snow of a lake that had been frozen for millions of years. As he blinked them open, the martial god smiled softly.

“Xianle, you have come.”

Xie Lian inclined his head in a respectful bow and said nothing.

When Jun Wu spoke, he was not loud, but his deep voice echoed through the entire Palace of Divine Might. All the eyes of the gathered officials focused on Xie Lian, and he understood immediately.

It appeared that this meeting wasn’t for discussing General Pei Junior and the Banyue Pass scandal.

The spotlight, it seemed, was on him.

Ling Wen approached the throne, dressed all in black and not sparing a word or smile. She drew a line through an item in the book she was holding.

“My Lord, there are a few heavenly officials still on patrol in the Mortal Realm, unable to return.”

Jun Wu nodded. “They have given their notice ahead of time.”

Ling Wen acknowledged the response, and Jun Wu turned to Xie Lian once more.

“Xianle, I am sure you are aware as to why you have been summoned here today.”

Xie Lian still had his head bowed. “I can guess. However, I had actually assumed that a decision had been made on the matter with General Pei Junior.”

Just then, a lyrical male voice called out from behind.

“How that matter will be decided is still hard to say.”

When Xie Lian turned his head to look, a martial god stepped into the great hall. His hand resting on the hilt of his sword, he walked toward the front. When he passed by Xie Lian, he stopped in his step, and the corners of his lips lifted.

"Your Highness. I've heard so much about you."

This martial god looked to be about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, graceful in his demeanor but resolute in his actions. Looking at his face, Xie Lian thought he was even more attractive than that statue he'd seen at Mount Yujun. It was the kind of handsomeness that could steal hearts, very much the charming type. Xie Lian didn't respond.

He continued, "Our Little Pei has certainly been in your care."

I've definitely offended him, Xie Lian thought. He returned the greeting.

"You flatter me. I've heard more about *you*, General Pei."

The words "I've heard more about you" were certainly not a lie. In the past few days, Xie Lian had skimmed through his scroll and briefly read the legends of some of the more famous heavenly officials. Among them was General Ming Guang, Pei Ming.

This Martial God of the North was skilled in battle, but the subject the mortals talked of with the most relish was his many amorous intrigues: the beautiful and the ugly, the stories left behind in wanton alleys. "Beautiful" stories had Pei Ming spend extravagant amounts of gold to save a famed yet pitiful escort from the brothels, prompting her to fall in love with him and henceforth remain pure and true to await his return. "Ugly" stories had Pei Ming travel a thousand miles for a one-night stand with a married woman, etcetera, and so on. On some level, Pei Ming was an awe-inspiring man. After reading through his stories, Xie Lian thought it was quite unbelievable that after so many years, only one Xuan Ji had been created from this way of life.

Because Pei Ming was accomplished in both battle and in love, his rivals and peers alike took great pleasure in cursing him to die, even better if he'd die from syphilis. But his fate was tough and relentless, and he never caught anything from the many flowers he'd plucked. He wouldn't die, and he'd even live longer than most of his peers. Until finally, one day, he lost a battle. Everyone laughed, thinking, *At last, he's met his end!* But then lightning crashed and thunder roared, and in that moment of imminent peril, he ascended to the heavens.

Those who hadn’t already died by his hand probably all died of outrage.

After ascension, Pei Ming didn’t change his way of life, and the scale of his tales of promiscuity only grew. From fairies and lady heavenly officials to female ghosts and demons: as long as they were beautiful, he would not hold back. Nonetheless, the charming ladies of the Mortal Realm still remained his favorite type. Many indecent love stories had him starring as the main male lead, and if it wasn’t for Xie Lian’s method of cultivation that demanded purity of body and of mind, he probably would have read a few of those books just out of curiosity.

Thus, in addition to his role as the martial god that ruled the north, the Mortal Realm also worshipped him as the God of Love. Even a number of heavenly officials would turn around and secretly pray to him should they bump into him in the heavens, hoping for some fortune in love. It had to be said that, although similar in sentiment, such a title was definitely more fortunate than Feng Xin’s unwarranted title of “Tremendous Masculinity.”

All the heavenly officials present in the hall were well aware of what both of those “I’ve heard so much about you” comments meant, and many roared with laughter in their heads.

After such pleasantries, Xie Lian said, “What does General Pei mean by ‘hard to say’?”

Pei Ming snapped his fingers, and a corpse suddenly appeared in the middle of the great hall, floating in midair.

Strictly speaking, this floating body was just a shell. It had no primordial spirit, completely empty on the inside. But it was covered in blood from head to toe, so by any practical measure, it was no different from a corpse. It had a handsome face, but its eyes were firmly shut. It was indeed A-Zhao…or rather, General Pei Junior’s clone.

To have such a thing appear so suddenly before an elegant crowd of heavenly officials inside the Palace of Divine Might was startling. A moment later, Pei Xiu was also brought in, but he still looked indifferent and apathetic even with shackles binding him. His head was bowed low, and he was silent.

"General Pei, what's the meaning of this?" Xie Lian asked.

Pei Xiu knelt down within the Palace of Divine Might, and Pei Ming replied, "During Little Pei's interrogation, he mentioned something I found quite curious."

Pei Ming paced halfway around Xie Lian and smiled. "I'm quite familiar with Little Pei's ability. Even if his clone's powers are reduced and nowhere near the level of his true self, it's still quite competent and capable of fighting evenly with a wrath ghost. However, he told me that he was surprised to meet a mortal who was so strong that Little Pei was unable to even withstand his attacks. Now, isn't that curious?"

Pei Ming continued, "And so I pressed for answers. It turns out, at the time, there was a red-clothed young man beside Your Highness while you were at Banyue Pass."

Hearing the words "red-clothed" made all the officials present shift expressions, and they all appeared uncomfortable. But Pei Ming's next statement made them completely agitated.

"And this young man, in the dark, was able to eradicate every Banyue-soldier-turned-wrath in a flash.

"Now, Your Highness, might you enlighten us as to who this red-clothed young man might be?"

If it wasn't a wrath, then it must be a supreme! A supreme that could kill hundreds of wraths in a flash. A supreme dressed all in red.

Anyone could guess who that young man probably was, yet no one wanted to be the first to say the name. Xie Lian cast a glance at the silent Pei Xiu and replied a little unnaturally.

"*Ahem*, really? Uh, I don't remember it very well. There was a caravan trapped in Banyue Pass at the time, and we spent a few days together. Maybe it was someone from the caravan."

"That can't be right, Your Highness," Pei Ming said. "According to Little Pei, you and that young man were unusually close. Not like someone you'd only just met or had only known for a few days. How can you not recall such a thing?"

No, you're wrong, that was the truth. It really was only a few days, Xie Lian thought. Nevertheless, his face gave nothing away.

Just then, from the sidelines, a white-clad cultivator casually waved his whisk and spoke up.

"General Pei, you've only heard Little Pei's side of the story. Little Pei has committed a crime, and he's currently in detention, soon to be exiled. Whether his words are believable is still hard to say, no?"

"Then we shall see if General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen can assist us," Pei Ming replied.

Following his line of sight, Xie Lian found Feng Xin and Mu Qing standing separately in the southwest and southeast corners of the hall.

Feng Xin still looked the same as in his memories—tall as always, standing extremely straight, his eyes determined, and his brows forever slightly furrowed. It made it seem that there was always something irritating him, but really he wasn't irritated at all.

Mu Qing, on the other hand, was somewhat different from what he remembered. His face was still pale without much redness, and his lips still thin and pursed, his eyes half-lidded. However, there was an aloof air surrounding him, one that clearly indicated he was interested in neither conversation nor the dispensing of compliments. He stood with his arms crossed, a finger on his right hand tapping his left elbow softly. It was hard to tell if he was at ease or if he was scheming something.

While the two were considered good-looking men, each had their own flaws. Hearing Pei Ming call them out, they both looked toward Jun Wu at the same time. It was only when Jun Wu gave a slight nod that they reluctantly stepped forward.

This was the first time since Xie Lian's third ascension that he'd come face-to-face with the two of them. He could sense all the eyes upon them going wild with excitement.

Wild was inevitable. It must be known that the Palace of Divine Might was the number one martial palace of heaven, and those without the title of heavenly official had no right to enter or attend court. The first time the Crown Prince of Xianle ascended, Feng Xin and Mu Qing were his deputy generals. At the time, they were only low-ranking officials from the Middle Court without even the right to scrub the floors of the Palace of Divine Might. And now, not only could these former junior officials stand openly in the palace's hall, but their ranks were even higher than that of their former master. What a turn of fate, how times had changed.

The three of them looked at each other, eyes flitting all over, stealing glimpses at one another but swiftly turning away and pretending not to care. Who knew what the other two were thinking? However, Xie Lian had pretty much figured out why Pei Ming had called them out to help.

As suspected, Pei Ming said, "General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen have both fought Hua Cheng before. I'm sure they can speak with authority regarding the weapon used by that person."

So the point of bringing forth the empty shell A-Zhao was for the court to inspect its wounds. Feng Xin and Mu Qing slowly approached the floating body. Xie Lian himself took a few steps forward to take a look, but it was splotched with so much dark blood that it was hard to discern anything. The other two, faces austere, took their time in their inspection. Finally, they raised their heads and swept a look at each other, seeming like neither of them wanted to speak first.

Ling Wen prompted from next to the throne. "Generals. Your conclusion?"

It was Feng Xin who spoke first, his voice dark. "It's him."

"The scimitar Eming," Mu Qing added.

Xie Lian was probably the only one among the heavenly officials present at the Palace of Divine Might who didn't know the significance of those words.

The scimitar Eming was the very same freakish weapon Hua Cheng had used when he challenged those thirty-three officials and single-handedly beat them to a pulp, annihilating their souls and dignity both!

Inside the Palace of Divine Might, the heavenly officials started whispering to each other, unreadable eyes watching Xie Lian.

"Many thanks to the two generals for confirming this fact, which verified my conjecture," Pei Ming said. "If the red-clothed young man who traveled next to Your Highness really was that person, then this matter is considerably more complicated."

The white-clad cultivator from before spoke up again. "General Pei, do you *truly* mean to imply that His Highness colluded with a supreme ghost king to frame General Pei Junior?"

Both times that cultivator spoke, he was on Xie Lian's side, so Xie Lian had to see who exactly this curious fellow cultivator was. What he saw was a person with clear, bright eyes. He wore a white jaded belt, held a whisk in his arms, and had a long sword carried on his back, with a folding fan tucked at his waist. His form was graceful and elegant, his expression spirited. And while he did look familiar, Xie Lian couldn't recall when he had met a friend such as this.

Pei Ming also gave the man a look, appearing like an annoyed elder who didn't want to deal with children. He shook his head and waved dismissively, dispersing the floating empty shell that was A-Zhao, then turned around and continued his argument.

"It may not be collusion. That person is powerful and wicked. Who knows what deceptive tricks he might've used to blind His Highness."

Pei Ming intended to pin all the chaos at Banyue Pass on Hua Cheng!

Xie Lian rebuked him, "General Pei, even if you won't believe me, you should still believe in Lord Wind Master. General Pei Junior admitted to the crime of luring passersby to Banyue Pass with his clone, and Lord Wind Master heard everything."

Pei Ming glanced at the white-clad cultivator again.

Xie Lian continued, "Besides, since we're both here at the Palace of Divine Might, you can simply ask the Emperor whether there are traces of any spells of deception cast on me."

Jun Wu, who sat high above, remained calm and unchanging. That meant Xie Lian was absolved.

Xie Lian then continued, "General Pei, let's keep things clear and separate. Let's not talk about whether the young man I traveled with was

Hua Cheng or not. At the very least, even if he was indeed Hua Cheng, that has nothing to do with what General Pei Junior has done. A supreme ghost king might have the worst possible name on people's tongues, but not everything can be blamed on him."

Xie Lian's own expression was composed and neutral when he uttered that name, but many in the hall felt cold shivers run down their backs.

Pei Ming replied, "Regardless, I believe this case needs to be re-examined. It would be best if the State Preceptor of Banyue that Your Highness has taken could be brought in for interrogation too."

To interrogate her for what? Torture her to confess a lie? Xie Lian hadn't yet responded when someone else spoke up.

Pei Xiu looked as if he didn't want to remain in the Palace of Divine Might a moment longer. He said in a low voice, "General. Let it go."

"What?" Pei Ming was irritated.

"There isn't any spell of deception—this is all my doing. I've disappointed you, sir," Pei Xiu confessed.

Pei Ming was right in the middle of clearing his name when Pei Xiu said this. Pei Ming turned cold, and he said darkly, "What bewitching concoction did that State Preceptor of Banyue feed you? Shut your mouth."

However, Pei Xiu raised his head. "Let it go, General! Little Pei isn't afraid to admit to things he's done. Since I've been caught red-handed, I'm prepared to receive any punishment that is handed down."

Pei Ming's face was written with shock, and it clearly read as: *You've always been so sensible, so why did you suddenly go nuts today?* He was just about to kick some sense back into Pei Xiu when Jun Wu spoke.

"Enough."

The moment that word was said, Pei Ming withdrew his leg and bowed.

Thus spoke Jun Wu: "The case of the Banyue Pass is settled. Take Little Pei away. He is to be exiled in a few days' time."

After some silence, Pei Ming acknowledged, "Yes, My Lord."

Xie Lian had only just breathed in relief when Pei Ming continued, “But, Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen have proven that the wounds on that empty shell were indeed inflicted by the scimitar Eming.”

“I understand,” Jun Wu replied. “That is a whole other matter.”

“Pray My Lord will look into it,” Pei Ming said.

“I will investigate, naturally. There is no need for concern.” After a pause, Jun Wu continued. “You are all dismissed for today. Xianle, you stay.”

It looked like Xie Lian would be personally interrogated. The heavenly officials had nothing left to say and bowed.

“Yes, My Lord.”

Having been dismissed, the other heavenly officials exited in their groups of two or three. When Feng Xin passed by, he glanced at Xie Lian, looking like he had something to say, but he stopped himself. Xie Lian smiled at him, and he looked startled before hurriedly leaving after all. Mu Qing, on the other hand, walked past without sparing a look, as if Xie Lian didn’t exist. And yet, he deliberately took a path to pass in front of him.

As for that white-clad cultivator, he walked over with his whisk in hand and a huge smile, ready to speak. But Pei Ming, who had just suffered a setback, walked over too, with one hand resting on his hilt and the other rubbing his nose.

He said helplessly, “Qingxuan, for your older brother’s sake, can you stop stirring up trouble?”

The smile disappeared from the face of the white-clad cultivator. “General Pei, there’s no need to use my brother against me. I’m not afraid of him.”

“You—” Pei Ming seemed to be gritting his teeth in impotent rage, unable to do anything about this. Finally, he pointed at the other cultivator. “You…you’ve really done in Little Pei this time. Two hundred years of exile.”

The white-clad cultivator swung his whisk wildly. “That’s Little Pei’s own doing. This has nothing to do with me!”

Looking like he didn’t want to continue this quarrel with Pei Ming, the white-clad cultivator flounced off. Xie Lian thought Pei Ming might stick around to taunt him further, but he didn’t, and simply exited the hall directly. In the large and spacious Palace of Divine Might, the only one left besides Jun Wu on his throne and Xie Lian standing below him was, surprisingly, the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu. Xie Lian thought that strange. Why did he stay? When Xie Lian approached, he saw that the man had his eyes closed and that he was somehow fast asleep on his feet.

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and feeling quite awed, he gently tapped the young man’s shoulder. “Your Highness. Your Highness?”

Lang Qianqiu jolted awake. “What happened?!”

“Nothing’s happened. The meeting is over,” Xie Lian explained.

Having just woken up, Lang Qianqiu was still a little dazed, and he asked in confusion, “Over? Just like that? What did we all discuss? I didn’t hear anything.”

“If you didn’t hear anything, then don’t worry about it,” Xie Lian said. “It wasn’t anything important anyway. Come now, time to go back.”

“Oh!” Lang Qianqiu went to leave, but when he reached the doors, he looked behind him. Still confused, he nevertheless flashed Xie Lian a big smile. “Thanks for waking me!”

Xie Lian waved at him with a cheerful grin. With everyone now finally cleared out, Xie Lian slowly turned around. Jun Wu descended from the throne. Hands clasped behind his back, he came before Xie Lian.

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower. The scimitar Eming.”

Xie Lian was like a cat picked up by the scruff of his neck, and he involuntarily straightened.

“So. What is going on?” Jun Wu questioned.

Xie Lian looked at him, then suddenly kneeled.

Before Xie Lian’s knees touched the floor, Jun Wu reached out and held his elbow, preventing him from kneeling. He sighed.

“Xianle.”

Xie Lian straightened once more, his head bowed. “I’m sorry.”

Jun Wu watched him. “Are you acknowledging your wrongs?”

“I am,” Xie Lian replied.

“Then, why not tell me what wrong you are acknowledging?” Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian was silent and Jun Wu shook his head.

“I did not think you would know.”

The Heavenly Emperor inclined his head, gesturing for Xie Lian to follow, and the two walked slowly toward the chambers behind the hall.

As they walked, Jun Wu, with his hands clasped in front, commented, “Xianle is all grown up now.”

Naturally, Xie Lian didn’t dare answer that comment. Jun Wu continued.

“Eight hundred years ago, when I sent you down, I told you to keep in periodic communication with me so you would not have to roll in the mud all by yourself. But once you left, there was not a word from you for eight hundred years, and all the while you unnecessarily tormented yourself down below. You’ve been ascended for some time now, but not once have you reported to the Palace of Divine Might. If anyone else was this impertinent, the Palace of Ling Wen would have censured them directly.”

Of course, Xie Lian’s “I’m sorry” earlier wasn’t directed to this matter, and Jun Wu was aware of this also.

He added, “If your apology was for those few sword attacks, then let it go. You said it yourself: ‘All is forgotten after a stabbing.’”

Xie Lian smiled wryly. “…How could I forget?”

“Then look to the future,” Jun Wu replied quietly. “There is still much we need you for.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “Xianle is but a lowly scrap immortal, without power. There is no need for me. I only hope not to be a burden.”

“Why deprecate yourself so? Did you not perform splendidly in these last two cases?” Jun Wu said.

“Except I may have offended General Pei.” Xie Lian sighed ruefully.

“Ming Guang is fine. I will keep an eye on him; you do not need to worry. However…” Jun Wu turned around. “Tell me, what kind of extraordinary character did you engage with when you descended this time?”

Xie Lian raised his hand. “My Lord, I swear I did nothing. Just, one day by chance, I encountered an interesting young man on the road, and we spent some time together. I didn’t think much of it.”

Jun Wu nodded. “Chance encounter, young man, Supreme Ghost King. Xianle, surely you are aware what the consequences would be if Ming Guang was to question you further and you confessed to this in front of the other officials? No one would believe you.”

“Xianle knows,” Xie Lian replied woefully. “So, I am grateful for My Lord’s timely intervention. My Lord, you’re not actually going to interrogate me, are you? I wouldn’t collude with the Ghost Realm. These are absurd concerns.”

“Naturally, I know you would not intentionally collude with the Ghost Realm,” Jun Wu said.

“I am grateful for My Lord’s trust,” Xie Lian replied.

“However, with things thus, it may no longer be appropriate to send you to investigate an urgent matter that I have on hand.”

“What is it?” Xie Lian inquired.

At this time, the two of them reached the chamber behind the great hall, separated from the main hall by a large mural. The front depicted a golden palace towering above a sea of clouds, radiant and brilliant. The back of the mural was another view, depicting mountains and valleys spanning over an enormous distance. Gazing over the expanse of the painting, one could see many tiny pearls embedded on this giant map, glinting like stars.

Each one of those pearls embedded on the map represented the location of a Temple of Divine Might built in the Mortal Realm. Eight hundred years earlier, when Jun Wu brought the newly ascended Xie Lian to these inner halls, the twinkling stars on the mural weren’t as dense. But now, the shimmering jewels seemed to fill one’s vision, overwhelming in their radiance.

Jun Wu stood before the mural and pointed at a place in the east. “Seven days ago, many saw with their own eyes a dragon of fire suddenly soaring into the sky from the deep mountains in this area.”

Xie Lian’s face grew serious.

Jun Wu, with one hand behind his back, used the other to softly rap on a place on the mural. “That dragon of fire lasted for two incense time before burning out. In that time, many witnessed the sight, but not a single person was injured. Do you know what that means?”

“The spell for the Ascending Fire Dragon emits intense flames that do not harm but can be seen by many due to the vast expanse of its display.

It’s a call for help,” Xie Lian replied.

“Correct. It was a distress signal, and it came from a heavenly official,” Jun Wu said.

“And it’s no ordinary call for help, it’s one of desperation,” Xie Lian added.

The flames of the Ascending Fire Dragon spell were extremely intense and needed to be strictly controlled to avoid causing any harm. Those strict controls would most assuredly drain an immense amount of a heavenly official’s spiritual power. If the casting official was not careful, their powers could easily backfire and they would destroy themself in the process. Unless they were absolutely desperate, very few heavenly officials would take such a risk. A sighting of this nature meant that a heavenly official had fallen into grave peril, with no other options left.

“Are there any officials whose whereabouts are currently unknown?” Xie Lian asked.

“The Banyue Pass case was not the only reason all officials were summoned back to court. The main purpose was to use this chance to investigate everyone’s whereabouts. Aside from those who usually do not show like the Rain Master and the Earth Master, even those who couldn’t make it back reported in.”

Xie Lian contemplated for a moment, then speculated: “Maybe it wasn’t any of the officials from this term? Maybe it’s one of the retired officials?”

“If that is the case, then I’m afraid our search parameters will need to expand. Many retired officials lost contact with the heavens long ago. It would be impossible to deduce who could be the one in peril,” Jun Wu said.

So, this was probably why Ling Wen and many of the civil officials had dark circles under their eyes and walked with such weak steps—they were working constantly on this case. No wonder they couldn’t break away to investigate the whereabouts of that boy with the Human Face Disease from Mount Yujun.

Xie Lian asked, “To corner a heavenly official to the point where they would use such a self-destructive spell, there must be great evil at work. Are there any demonic gatherings or lairs in that area?”

“There are,” Jun Wu replied. “And very close by. Do you know of Ghost City?”

Xie Lian thought about it and replied, “I’ve heard of it.”

Ghost City was the most prosperous place within the Ghost Realm, situated right at the crossroads of the Mortal and the Ghost Realms. It was where all manner of ghosts gathered in swarms to conduct trade and exchange, and it was complete pandemonium. Some cultivators of a certain skill level would venture there to do business or seek information. Sometimes, there would even be heavenly officials in disguise, touring the city for curiosity’s sake or other unspeakable reasons. Once in a while, there would also be those who’d entered by mistake, and they would either be eaten alive or scared half to death.

Since ancient times—although not as ancient as Xie Lian—there had always been many tales of Ghost City in the Mortal Realm. Xie Lian remembered one of the stories had a man traveling at night, who saw a bustling market before him decked out with large red lanterns and colorful signs. He entered the market in high spirits but found that everyone around him wore a mask, and if they were not cloaked as such, then they were extremely ugly—very curious! He didn’t think deeply on it, and bought a bowl of noodles and sat down to eat. But as he dug into his food and ate, the food didn’t feel right; when he looked closely, the noodles were actually squirming strands of hair!

Xie Lian brought himself back to the present, and Jun Wu continued.

“After that pillar of fire appeared, I immediately sent officials to investigate the area—but there was no evidence of anything, so it is very possible that they moved to Ghost City. However, the Heavenly Realm and the Ghost Realm have always drawn very clear borders, and without enough proof, we cannot intrude on Ghost City. Which is why I need someone to descend in secret this time and investigate.”

“We can’t alert the enemy and have them move again,” Xie Lian said. “Is that why this couldn’t be discussed openly at the great hall with everyone? To prevent information leaks?”

“Correct,” Jun Wu replied.

“Then, My Lord, pray give Xianle your command.”

"You were the first candidate I originally had in mind," Jun Wu said. "But for this, it may be inconvenient for you to go."

"How would it be inconvenient?" Xie Lian asked.

"First, the east is guarded by Lang Qianqiu. If you should go, you would have to cooperate with him," Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian responded, "That would not be a problem, please rest assured."

"Second," Jun Wu continued, "do you know in whose territory Ghost City is seated?"

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback. "Is it Hua Cheng?"

Jun Wu nodded slowly, and Xie Lian's guess was confirmed. But then, something else came to mind.

That distress pillar of fire blazed up seven days ago. Coincidentally, it was seven days ago when Hua Cheng left Puqi Shrine. The timing was too perfect. Could there be a connection between the two events?

"It would seem you have a rather good relationship with him, which is fine," Jun Wu said. "The only thing I am concerned about is whether he is involved. If this makes it awkward for you, then do not force yourself. If you have any other suggestions or anyone you would nominate, do let me know."

However, Xie Lian still said, "Let me go. I don't think Crimson Rain Sought Flower is a disingenuous person."

Jun Wu looked at him. "Xianle, I know you are very capable and know what you are doing. However, I also know that you always think the best of everyone."

Xie Lian gave a small smile at his words. "Please don't say it like I'm a little princess who has never left home. Those words really don't suit me anymore."

Jun Wu shook his head. "I should not comment on the friends you make, but I will still say this: be careful of Hua Cheng."

Hearing this, Xie Lian bowed his head slightly, keeping his eyes down and saying nothing. He should've responded with "Yes, My Lord," as he should have been able to say yes with ease by that point. Yet, for some reason, he really didn't want to say that particular "yes."

"Be especially careful of that wicked blade of his," Jun Wu added.

"What do you mean?" Xie Lian asked.

"The scimitar Eming is a cursed blade, a blade of misfortune. To forge such an evil weapon would require terrifyingly cruel sacrifice and bloody determination. Do not touch it, and do not let it touch you either. If you do, the consequences will be unimaginable," Jun Wu replied.

Xie Lian couldn't tell where his sudden surge of confidence came from, but inwardly, he thought: *San Lang probably wouldn't strike at me with a blade.*

Still, he responded, "Xianle understands."

Jun Wu nodded. "I will of course be at ease knowing that you have taken this case. Since this does not make things awkward for you, then it is ideal. Nonetheless, going on this mission alone may be too much. Are there any officials you would like to join you?"

"…It doesn't matter," Xie Lian said, after some thought. "But preferably someone easy to get along with. It'd be best if they're powerful too, so they can lend me some spiritual power sometimes."

Jun Wu smiled. "You disqualified both Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen with the first condition."

That was true. No one could say that the Feng Xin and Mu Qing of today were personalities that were easy to get along with. Xie Lian started chuckling too.

"How are things between the three of you? Have you spoken with them yet?" Jun Wu asked.

The Heavenly Emperor himself never entered the communication array and thus was naturally unaware of the buzzing chitchat that went on among the officials.

"We spoke a few words," Xie Lian replied.

"It's been so many years, and yet you have only spoken a few words?" Jun Wu inquired. "Ah, yes. I heard that when you ascended this time, you destroyed many of your fellow officials' palaces, one of which was Nan Yang's."

Xie Lian argued back, "I paid back that debt! All eight million eight hundred and eighty thousand merits! And for this, I need to thank My Lord for giving me the opportunity to go to Mount Yujun."

"Thank Nan Yang," Jun Wu replied. "I heard Ling Wen say it was he who privately approached her and said there was no need for you to pay back the reconstruction cost."

Xie Lian was stunned. "I…didn't know about this at all."

No wonder those eight million eight hundred and eighty thousand merits were so easily repaid if it turned out that so much of it had already been intentionally forgiven. Yet at the time, it was the Palace of Nan Yang that suffered the most damage; he'd been told half of the golden roof had collapsed.

"Nan Yang made sure Ling Wen would not tell you, so you were naturally unaware. Since he did not want you to know, it would be best to continue feigning ignorance," Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian didn't know how to feel about this. Complicated and bittersweet feelings clouded his mind, and his thoughts scattered all over the place. Finally, he only sighed soundlessly and thought, *Truly, in this world, the words "don't tell anyone" are empty.*

Jun Wu contemplated for a moment, then asked once more, "If Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen will not do, how about the Wind Master?"

Xie Lian pondered the option. "Lord Wind Master is a very good person, but I don't know if she would want to go on this mission with me."

"The Wind Master is powerful," Jun Wu said. "A lively person who enjoys making friends and thus matches your first condition of 'easy to get along with.' When reporting in with me, the Wind Master also spoke well of you. I think you two will be fine. If you do not have any other questions, then descend with the Wind Master and go forth to investigate Ghost City. Also…"

"Yes?"

Jun Wu said unhurriedly, "Work hard, but do not force yourself."

Xie Lian was startled by those words. A moment later, he smiled. “What is My Lord saying? I’m not forcing myself.”

Jun Wu patted Xie Lian’s shoulders. “Return to the Palace of Xianle to rest for now. I will send word to summon the Wind Master.”

Xie Lian blinked. “I don’t have enough merits, so no palace has been erected. The Palace of Xianle from the past has long since been torn down. So, what Palace of Xianle?”

“I have granted you a new one,” Jun Wu said. “You cannot possibly always cram yourself into that decrepit little shrine?”

Xie Lian left the Palace of Divine Might and was led to the Palace of Xianle by a junior official from Jun Wu’s palace.

This Palace of Xianle was very nearly an exact copy of the one he had in the past: glazed tiles with red walls, sumptuous and elegant. He stood outside the palace gates for a long time, but not a shred of desire to enter came to him. The Scrap Immortal was still best suited to a scrapped shrine, after all. A proud and glamorous heavenly palace like this wasn’t a place he could stay.

He loitered outside the entrance and waited for Lord Wind Master to come find him, but after a while, the one who appeared was unexpectedly not the lady cultivator in white Daoist robes but another white-clad cultivator.

This cultivator was in glowing spirits, with an air of transcendence fluttering about him. It was the one from the meeting at the Palace of Divine Might who had randomly fought with Pei Ming, Qingxuan.

He waved his whisk, a smile hanging from his lips. “Greetings, Your Highness!”

Xie Lian smiled back. “Greetings, fellow cultivator.”

Truthfully, he really wanted to ask who he was but thought it’d be rude. He was about to sneak a peek at his scroll to see which heavenly official was named Qingxuan when the person in question walked up to him and exclaimed, “Let’s go! Let’s go take a stroll down below.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “My friend, I’m waiting for someone.”

Hearing this, the cultivator stuffed his whisk into the back collar of his outer robe and turned around in wonder. “Who else are you waiting for?”

“I’m waiting for Lord Wind Master,” Xie Lian replied.

The white-clad cultivator looked even more confused. “Aren’t I right here?”

“…” Xie Lian’s brows jumped. “You’re the Wind Master?”

The other flashed open his fan and started fanning. “I am the Wind Master; was there ever any doubt? Did you not know who I was?! Have you never heard my name: the Wind Master Qingxuan?!”

His tone was irrefutable and absolute, strong and confident, as if Xie Lian not knowing his name was an impossible thought to entertain. The folding fan had the word for wind, “feng,”[1] written on the front, while the back had three flowing, inclining lines—the exact same fan that the lady cultivator in white had held!

Xie Lian suddenly recalled that Fu Yao had mentioned that some upper court heavenly officials, under special circumstances, had the ability to transform their appearance. While at Banyue, Nan Feng had also uttered an incomplete sentence:

“*The Wind Master had always been…*”

Had always been? Been what?

A man?!

After getting dragged for a few steps, Xie Lian still couldn’t fully process this information.

“Um…Lord Wind Master, you—you—you—*why* did you disguise yourself as a woman last time?!”

“What? Was I not beautiful?” the Wind Master asked.

“Yes? But…” Xie Lian was still confused.

“If I was beautiful, then there’s no but! As long as I look good!” The Wind Master smiled brightly. “Of course, it’s because I knew I’d look good that I was in disguise!”

Having said that, he looked like he’d suddenly come up with an idea and closed his fan. He gave Xie Lian a once-over with a calculating expression, then spoke after a moment.

“Speaking of which, don’t we need to go undercover for this mission to Ghost City?”

“…???” Xie Lian replied.

Chapter 13:
Entering Ghost City, the Crown Prince Chances Upon the Ghost King

MUCH ASHAMED, it wasn't until four hours later that Xie Lian had the time to sneak a peek at his scroll to finally learn this Wind Master's backstory.

The Five Elemental Masters of the Heavenly Realm used their titles in place of their surnames. For example, before the Earth Master ascended, his mortal name was Ming Yi. After ascension, he was addressed as "Earth Master Yi." As for the Wind Master, his former name was Shi Qingxuan, but after ascension he was called "Wind Master Qingxuan." Befitting of his title, his personality was like a breeze: he was sociable and generous, uncaring about petty details, and very popular in the heavens, as was apparent from him easily tossing out ten thousand merits in the communication array. But at the end of the day, as his older brother was the god who controlled mortal wealth, of course the Wind Master was generous and uncaring about petty details.

Indeed, the older brother of Wind Master Qingxuan was the one they called "Water Tyrant," the Water Master Wudu.

Descending to the lower realms together, the two gods walked side by side, chatting as they traveled. Xie Lian had his arms crossed, and he commented sincerely, "The Pei family producing two ascended generals under one name was already a legend. But you and your brother ascending at the same time, one wind, one water, that is truly a tale of wonder."

It must be known that, in a million people, there might not be even one with the ability to ascend. Pei Ming and Pei Xiu were separated by a few hundred years, and Pei Xiu wasn't even a direct descendant; he was from Pei Ming's brother's branch of the family, a grand-who-knows-how-many-times-nephew. The Water Master Wudu and the Wind Master Qingxuan were true blood-related brothers, a genuine pair of ascended officials from the same house, and thus truly incredible.

Shi Qingxuan laughed it off. “It’s nothing. My brother and I grew up in the same place, went to school under the same teacher, and cultivated the same path, so naturally we ascended together in the same lifetime.”

That was something Xie Lian also learned when he was cramming from the scroll earlier. Of the two elemental masters, Shi Wudu ascended first, but after only a few years, his brother Shi Qingxuan also successfully transcended a Heavenly Tribulation. Mortals often worshipped the two heavenly officials together in the same temple and praised them as equals. It was obvious that the two brothers enjoyed an excellent relationship. The Water Master must be the reason why Pei Ming wouldn’t touch the Wind Master, as San Lang and Nan Feng had mentioned. After all, the brother of the Water Tyrant was not one to be picked on so easily.

Having thought thus far, another point came to Xie Lian’s mind. He considered it before asking, “Lord Wind Master. At the Palace of Divine Might, from the way General Pei spoke, it sounded as if he shared a friendship with your brother. Won’t your filing the complaint against General Pei Junior affect—”

“Nah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “My brother already knows I can’t stand Pei Ming.”

“Knowing is one thing, acting is another,” Xie Lian said. “Won’t this cause a rift between Lord Water Master and General Pei?”

“If it caused a rift, even better! I *wish* my brother would stop hanging out with him and leave that ‘Three Tumors’ label behind one day,” Shi Qingxuan said.

Xie Lian stopped. “What ‘Three Tumors’?”

Shi Qingxuan exclaimed, astonished, “What?! You don’t know about that either? Fine, all right. I know now you’re not up to date on anything. You can just listen for giggles. ‘The Three Tumors’ is the moniker given to the three heavenly officials who have a bad rep with basically everyone but are best buddies with each other: namely, Ming Guang, Ling Wen, and my brother.”

I can’t believe it’s not Xie Lian, Xie Lian, and Xie Lian, Xie Lian thought.

Shi Qingxuan fanned his Wind Master fan and continued, “Even if I can’t stand him, the whole business this time around was Little Pei’s fault. There’s no way I’d let Pei Ming pin this on the State Preceptor of Banyue and protect Little Pei. It doesn’t matter if you’re a mortal, or a god, or a ghost, you have to be responsible for your own actions. Bullying a little girl is low.”

The last line was uttered in contempt, and Xie Lian smiled. “The Wind Master is a defender of justice.”

Shi Qingxuan laughed. “You’re not bad yourself! I’d heard rumors here and there about Banyue Pass but never had the time to investigate. Plus, my brother would yell at me about it. With so much on my plate, I’d forgotten. When I heard you ask about it in the communication array the other day, it reminded me that there was such a case pending, and so I went to check it out. Turns out that not only did you ask, you even went there yourself! So I thought, dang, what a guy! Ha ha ha ha ha…”

This Wind Master certainly had an extremely straightforward and interesting personality, and Xie Lian could understand now why he was so popular in the heavens. He smiled, surprised to have made the acquaintance of such a heavenly official in the Upper Court. But just as he turned his head to face him, the white-clad cultivator beside him had transformed into a lady Daoist in white. It was so sudden, Xie Lian almost stumbled in his step.

“Lord Wind Master, why the sudden transformation?”

“Oh. Truth be told, Your Highness, I’m actually more powerful in this form.” Shi Qingxuan preened her long hair.

As was mentioned earlier, the Wind Master and the Water Master were often worshipped together. However, this also produced a bizarre accident. Perhaps people thought that a single temple worshipping two male gods together was lacking something. Lords and Ladies go hand in hand, so people thought having one male god and one female god would make it seem more complete. Thus, someone took a certain initiative, and that initiative was to sculpt the Wind Master as a goddess.

But it didn’t end with the goddess statue; they had to make up stories to go with it too—things like the Water and Wind Gods being brother and sister. There was even a version where they were husband and wife. After a few centuries, the falsehoods spread, and from them came even more outlandish legends. The two heavenly officials once read through the tales on a whim and cringed so hard their goosebumps practically spilled off them. Nonetheless, there were more than a few who believed in those outrageous stories, and thus did the Wind Master's gender become confused. "My Lady, prithee watch over me" could be heard all over the place. Thus, Shi Qingxuan was also known by the moniker "Lady Wind Master."

Although silly, such absurd occurrences were not rare. Ling Wen, for example, had a similar experience. She was a lady heavenly official, but she never dressed flamboyantly like the other celestial maidens. She was often dressed in black attire, she was competent and efficient, and she spent her days working madly through stacks and stacks of administrative scrolls at her palace. If one should ask any mortal "Is Ling Wen a man or a woman?" any one of them would respond with confidence: a man. And although her personality was partly to blame, much of it was due to another reason.

Come now, of course a civil god must be male! For that alone, when Ling Wen ascended, she suffered brutal disadvantages. She was a civil goddess, but many in the Mortal Realm thought: How could a woman ever reach that position? How could a lady possibly ensure good fortune in scholarly pursuits? She must not be effective! Thus, no matter how hard she worked, she still had only a few devotees.

As time went on, some of her temple attendants were so upset by this treatment that they rebuilt her statues into male forms, transforming Ling Wen-yuanjun to Ling Wen-zhenjun, and crafted their own astonishing legends and backstories. After this change, her temples became prosperous, and everyone praised how effective Ling Wen was. But in truth, it was still the same heavenly official, her spiritual powers never changed, and the legends were all fake. Still, the people ate them up. Since then, whenever Ling Wen needed to appear in dreams or show herself to mortals, she could only do so in a male form.

By the same logic, because the people believed that it had to be a man and a woman together holding down the fort in the Temple of Wind and Water, that was how it became. Who cared whether you were a god or a ghost? You were whatever people believed you to be. Appearances could be a million miles off the mark from the real thing, and people would still see what they wanted to see. It was something the Upper Court heavenly officials had long since stopped fretting over.

As for Shi Qingxuan, from Xie Lian's own observations, he didn't appear to mind at all. In fact, he was completely immersed and enjoying himself. Not only that, he was even passionate about dragging others into it, making Xie Lian wonder about the real gender of the lady in black who was with the Wind Master before. In the four hours that they spent traveling down from the Heavenly Realm together, Shi Qingxuan had tirelessly tried to persuade Xie Lian to disguise himself as a woman, with extremely convincing reasons such as:

"Women have stronger yin energy—therefore, it'll be much easier for you to hide in the Ghost City crowds."

Xie Lian thought about it but then courteously rejected the idea. "I don't have enough spiritual energy to transform."

To that, Shi Qingxuan replied enthusiastically, "I'll lend you mine! Isn't that the whole reason why the Heavenly Emperor appointed me to this mission?"

"My lord, please save your powers for when we're actually fighting the enemy…"

Shi Qingxuan couldn't persuade Xie Lian, so she stopped pushing. By that time, the two had reached a wild field in the middle of nowhere. The night had deepened, and crows cawed raucously in the pitch-black woods. The air was ominous and desolate.

Xie Lian watched for a moment before he said, "Let's wait here. This place is thick with yin energy, and there's a large graveyard nearby, so there should be at least one or two going to the market. We'll follow them when the time comes."

Thus, the pair crouched on top of a burial mound and waited.

They weren't in that position for very long when Shi Qingxuan reached into a sleeve, rummaged around, and dug out a small jug of liquor. "You want some?"

Xie Lian reached for the jug and took a sip, felt his throat burn, and then gave the jug back. "Thanks."

Shi Qingxuan took the jug and gulped down a couple of swallows. “You can’t drink?”

“I can,” Xie Lian replied. “But excessive drinking causes insanity, so a simple taste is enough. What time is it?”

Shi Qingxuan hummed and replied, “It’s midnight.”

“Hm. It should be about time, then,” Xie Lian said.

Just as he finished his sentence, the two saw a faint row of lights appear deep in the woods.

That faint row of lights slowly came closer and closer. When it emerged from the forest, the two finally saw that it was a group of expressionless women dressed in white, walking in a line. Some were old, some were young, some beautiful, some ugly. Each of them was wearing funeral garb and had a white lantern in hand, walking at an easy pace.

They had to be female ghosts heading to the Ghost City markets in the deep night.

“Let’s follow them,” Xie Lian whispered.

Shi Qingxuan nodded, took a last swig from the jug, and tossed it aside. They then stood up and casually trailed behind the group of ghosts.

The two had already prepared by erasing their spiritual aura; when they walked, they were like person-shaped logs without the scent of life. The band of female ghosts before them held their white lanterns and followed an unknown path in the dark woods, strolling while chatting in delicate voices.

“I’m so glad Ghost City’s open again! I need a facial!” one said.

“What happened to your face? Didn’t you just get one?” another replied.

The first one responded, “It rotted again! *Hahhh*, the one who served me last time said it was guaranteed fresh for a year! But it hasn’t even been half that.”

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan trailed behind them, listening to their chatter, and didn’t speak a word. When they heard something funny, at most, their lips would twitch and they’d share looks with each other.

After about an hour, the group came to a valley.

A faint red light emitted from deep within it, and there was music wafting in the ethereal night. Xie Lian grew more and more curious to finally see for himself what Ghost City looked like. Yet unexpectedly, just as they were entering the valley, the last ghost in the line suddenly turned her head and discovered them.

Confused, she asked, “Who are you two?”

The question made all the ghastly pale-faced heads turn, and the women surrounded them, curious.

“When did they start following us? These two weren’t part of the group when we left the burial grounds.”

“Which burial ground did you come from? How come we’ve never seen your faces before?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat. “We…came from a burial ground much farther away, so of course you’ve never seen us.”

Shi Qingxuan smiled too. “That’s right! We’ve traveled a long way just to reach Ghost City.”

The white-clad female ghosts were silent and stared at them expressionlessly. If they were anyone else, they’d probably fall to the ground shivering in fright. Xie Lian wasn’t afraid of having their identities exposed, though. These meek female ghosts could hardly threaten them. Still, since Ghost City was right before their eyes, it wouldn’t be wise to start anything so close to their target, lest they alert their enemy.

Just then, one of the women staring at Shi Qingxuan spoke up languidly.

“Meimei, your face is very nicely maintained,” she said.

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan were taken aback. Then, the two immediately nodded uniformly.

Xie Lian replied, “It’s all right, not bad.”

Shi Qingxuan copied his tone and said, “Pretty good, right?”

All the female ghosts then approached and started a discussion.

“Yeah, not rotten at all.”

"Meimei, where did you get your face done?"

"What's your secret?"

"Can you recommend a place?"

Shi Qingxuan didn't know how to respond, so she only laughed awkwardly to delay answering. Just then, the group turned around, and suddenly, crimson light flooded Xie Lian's vision.

A strange and mysterious world opened before him.

They were on a long street.

It was so long that there was no end in sight. Along the edges of the great street were all types of bustling stores and stalls. Colorful signs flew high above, and giant red lanterns were hung below. "People" filled the street, most wearing masks of faces crying, laughing, angry—some human, some not human. Those without masks could only be described as "bizarre." Some had large heads and small bodies, some skinny as a bamboo stick, and some flat like a pancake and pressed to the ground, complaining as pedestrians walked all over them.

Xie Lian was careful not to step on anything weird. When he passed by a food stall, he saw the stall owner use a giant bone to furiously stir a giant pot of soup; while stirring, saliva spilled from between the stall owner's teeth, dripping into the soup. In that weird, many-colored soup he could see eyeballs floating. Xie Lian watched and was filled with a sudden sense of confidence.

On the other side, there were strange buskers performing. A buff, burly man had a small ghost, weak as a chick, in his clutches, and the man opened his mouth to blow massive flames and barbeque the small ghost while it squealed and writhed like a pig being slaughtered. The spectators cheered and shrieked, shouting "bravo!" There were even insane individuals randomly throwing money into the air, the paper fluttering in the sky like drifting snow. When one slip of it flew before Xie Lian, he nabbed it and flipped it over. It was the money of the dead, as he thought.

Continuing down the street, there was a butcher stall with a row of languishing, pallid human heads, hung in order of age, as indicated on their price tags: a child's meat was this much, a youth's meat was that much, a grown man's meat cost this amount, a mature woman's meat went for that much, cartilage sold for this. The apron-clad butcher, knife in hand, was a boar with thick, black hair. What it was chopping under its knife was a muscular human leg, still twitching.

This was truly a swarm of evil, a carnival of hell.

Humans butchering pigs was a common sight, but pigs butchering humans wasn’t, so Xie Lian couldn’t help but steal a few extra peeks. The boar noticed him watching though and immediately reacted.

“What are ya lookin’ at? You buyin’?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “No.”

The boar butcher continued to chop violently onto the cutting board, blood spraying all over. He yelled, voice rough, “If you ain’t buyin’, then don’t watch! Fuckin’ tryin’a start somethin’? Get outta here!”

Xie Lian got outta there. But just as his steps quickened, he suddenly realized something very bad.

That group of female ghosts and Shi Qingxuan had disappeared without a trace.

Shocked, Xie Lian wanted to connect with the Wind Master at once within the communication array, afraid that she was really dragged away by those ghosts to do facials. However, this was Ghost City, and the communication spells used by the heavenly realm were restricted. The connection to the array didn’t work, so he had no choice but to wander the streets aimlessly in search of the missing Wind Master.

As he walked, someone suddenly grabbed him. Already alert and tense, Xie Lian reacted instantly.

“Who?!”

The one who stopped him was a woman, and she was surprised by Xie Lian’s reaction. But after seeing his face clearly, she started giggling, playing coy.

“Hey there, little gege. Yer lookin’ mighty fine.”

This woman was in an exceedingly revealing dress, her makeup terrifyingly loud. The white powder was uneven, and when she opened her mouth, clumps of it would flake off her face. Her bosom was stuffed full, as if something were packed under her flesh. Truly, a shocking sight.

Xie Lian gently pushed away her thin, claw-like fingers and said, “Miss, there’s no need to speak like that.”

The woman was stunned at first, then burst out laughing. “Dear lord! ‘Miss’?! Who still calls me that in this day and age? Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

The people around them all seemed to think it was funny too, and they started laughing along. Xie Lian shook his head, but before he could speak, the woman pounced on him.

“Oh, don’t go! Little gege, I like you. Come and have fun with me all night, I won’t ask for money!” She pouted and winked. “But I will *charge*. Hee hee hee hee hee…”

What a sin, Xie Lian repented inwardly, then kindly but firmly pushed her away. He chided gently, “Miss, please.”

Yet the woman suddenly appeared to be annoyed and screeched, “Stop calling me ‘Miss.’ Ain’t no one who cares for it! Quit wastin’ my time—are ya comin’ or not?”

To tempt Xie Lian further, the woman suddenly unlaced her already-revealing shirt. Her boldness caught Xie Lian off guard and he didn’t stop her in time, so he sighed softly again, turning his eyes away. He continued on his way, stepping around her. However, the female ghost stopped him again and continued her teasing.

“D’ya like what you see?”

Little did she realize, Xie Lian had grown up in the Royal Holy Temple, practicing abstinence for most of his mortal life. His body and mind had always been guarded and as steady as the mountains. It didn’t matter what he saw, his heart was as still as water. Anything unseemly would make him automatically chant *Dao De Jing*[2] sonorously in his mind, keeping him completely indifferent.

Unsuccessful in her temptation, the female ghost’s expression changed, and she *tsk*-ed. “You don’t want any o’ this? Not even fer free? Are ya even a man?!”

Xie Lian moved his eyes away. “I am.”

“Then prove it!” the female ghost yelled.

From the sidelines, a passerby laughed mockingly. “You slut! He thinks yer old an’ ugly, an’ want none o’ you. What are ya doin’ bein’ so clingy?”

Hearing those words, Xie Lian deadpanned with a straight face: “That’s not it. It’s because I have an unspeakable affliction. I can’t get erect.”

Everyone was stunned.

Then in a flash, boisterous laughter erupted.

“HA HA HA HA HA HA HA…”

The victim of ridicule was now Xie Lian. None had ever met a man who was brave enough to announce in public that he had such a problem. However, to someone like Xie Lian, it didn’t matter in the least whether his root of evil could sin or not, so he’d developed the habit of using that as an excuse to get out of these kinds of situations. And it was a method that worked excellently every single time. Sure enough, the female ghost redid her shirt immediately and stopped pestering him.

“No wonder yer like this. What a pig! If ya have a problem, why didn’t ya say so sooner? *Tsk!*”

Not far behind them, the boar butcher chopped down again and yelled, “Fuckin’ slut! What’s that you say? What’s wrong with pigs?!”

The female ghost wasn’t scared and yelled right back, “Ya, what’s wrong with pigs?! Fuckin’ animals!”

Soon, the long street was filled with shouting and squawking and people hollering.

“That ghost woman Lan Chang is startin’ shit again!”

“Butcher Zhu is choppin’ ghosts!”

The two sides rowdily started tearing into each other, and in the midst of that pandemonium, Xie Lian was finally able to slip away. After he’d put some distance between them, he looked back toward the crowd and heaved a sigh.

Xie Lian walked a bit more, and soon he came upon further commotion ahead. He stopped in front of a gigantic red building.

This building was extraordinary in its grand and imposing style: its columns, roofs, walls, and everything were painted a magnificent bright red, and the floors were covered in thick, exquisite carpet. If it must be compared, this building was on par with Heaven's palaces. The only difference was one of aesthetics: this place was more spectacular and sumptuous than stately and dignified. Crowds flowed in and out of the doors, and loud, excited voices boomed from the inside—very lively. Upon a closer look, Xie Lian saw that this place appeared to be a gambler's den.

Xie Lian walked up to the doors, and on the two pillars at the entrance, there was a set of couplets. The left said "Money Over Life," and the right said "Gains Over Shame." On the top horizontal beam, it said "HA HA HA HA."

"…"

The lines were vulgar and crass, not worthy of being entrance couplets. The calligraphy was also wild, clumsy, and frenzied—a disgrace to call it calligraphy at all! It was as if someone took a brush while drunk and scribbled with foul intent, and then the words were blown over by a blast of evil aura to form it. Xie Lian was once heir to the throne, and he was taught calligraphy by the finest teachers in the land. The characters he saw before him now were a real tragedy. In fact, the characters were so hellish that Xie Lian started to think they were kind of funny and shook his head. *The Wind Master wouldn't be hanging around here,* he thought. *I'll have a better chance searching the beauty parlors for female ghosts.*

He certainly should have just moved on, yet inexplicably, after only a few steps, he turned back around and went inside.

In the main hall of the Gambler's Den, the crowd was packed in from wall to wall. Innumerable heads were moving, and laughter and desperate cries alike choked the air. Xie Lian had only descended a few steps when he suddenly heard screaming, and when he looked to where it had come from, four masked bouncers were walking over carrying a guest.

That man appeared to be in excruciating pain, writhing and howling while being carried, gushing blood that he left in his wake. Both of his legs had been cleanly cut off at the knees, and blood was spewing everywhere.

A small ghost followed closely and greedily licked up all the blood on the floor as it went.

It was a horrifying sight, yet no one in the Gambler's Den spared it a glance. They continued to shout and cheer, rolling about. Of course, most who gambled here weren't humans, and if they were, they were no ordinary humans.

Xie Lian twisted in place to let the four bouncers carrying the man pass by, and then he continued deeper into the den. A petite attendant in a laughing mask approached to welcome him.

"Gongzi, are you here to play?"

Xie Lian replied with a smile, "I don't have money on me. Mind if I just look?"

In his experience, the moment you said those words in any establishment, you'd get booted. Why would you enter without money? Yet the petite attendant just giggled.

"No money is not a problem. Those who come here to play don't usually use money to gamble."

"Really?" Xie Lian asked.

The petite attendant covered her mouth. "Really. Gongzi, please come with me."

She waved at Xie Lian, beckoning him, and sashayed away. Xie Lian followed her without a word but carefully observed all around him.

Inside and out, this Gambler's Den was exceedingly extravagant and stylish but not at all tacky; it was a building rich with taste. The petite attendant brought Xie Lian to the very back of the main hall to a long table that was packed like sardines with guests.

Xie Lian had only just approached when he heard a man cry, "I bet my arm!"

There were too many onlookers. Xie Lian couldn't get through and could only listen from the outskirts of the crowd. Suddenly, he heard another voice lazily respond.

“No need. Never mind your arm, even your shit life is worthless here.”

Hearing that voice, Xie Lian’s heart suddenly jumped.

He silently mouthed the name, “San Lang.”

He’d indeed just heard the voice of that young man. Yet it was slightly deeper than he remembered, which was precisely why it sounded even more pleasing to the ears. Despite being surrounded by boisterous brouhaha, the voice still rang loud and clear, and cut through the cacophony of the Gambler’s Den to reach him.

Xie Lian looked up. Only then did he notice that behind the long table there was a screen curtain. And behind the curtain, he could see a faint red figure lying back, lounging on a chair.

Chapter 14: Admiring the Flower through Red Clouds, a Heart Full of Affection

THOUGH HUA CHENG'S WORDS were filled with contempt, the moment he spoke, the man in question allowed the taunting from all around and dared not argue back.

The attendant who had led Xie Lian to the long table said, "Gongzi, you are very lucky today."

Xie Lian never moved his gaze from the table. "How so?"

"Our Chengzhu[3] rarely comes by," the attendant replied. "It is only these past few days that he has been in the mood, so is this not good luck?"

Judging by her tone, Xie Lian could tell that the attendant held this "Chengzhu" in high regard, as if the mere sight of him was the greatest of fortune. Xie Lian couldn't help but smile.

The screen curtain was made of soft silk, captivating in its red silhouette, a truly enchanting sight. In front of the red curtain there were a few charming women overlooking the gambling table. Xie Lian was content to just watch from the background at first, but the moment he heard Hua Cheng's voice, he started trying to push through the crowd, though without drawing any attention to the fact that he was there. Finally, he squeezed through to the table and saw the man in the middle of putting down his bets.

The betting man was a living human. Xie Lian wasn't surprised, as it was known that there were more than just ghosts in Ghost City—there were also a number of cultivators of considerable skill, and once in a while, mortals at the brink of death, or those who wished to die, would stumble in by accident. The gambling man also had a mask on, but both his eyes were visible, bulging and laced with red as if they were bleeding. His lips were pale, like he hadn't seen the sun in days. Although he was a living human, he resembled a ghost more than any of the ghosts present.

Both of his hands were pressing down tightly on a black wooden dice cup on the table, and after holding back for a moment, he shouted with the air of a man who'd stopped caring about anything else: "But…how come the other guy was allowed to bet both his legs?!"

One of the croupiers before the red curtain smiled. "The one before used to be an acclaimed bandit, known wherever he went for his light footwork and ability to take flight. That ability was the essence of his life, so his legs were deemed a worthy bet. You are neither a skilled artisan nor a renowned medic; what worth does your one arm possess?"

The man gritted his teeth. "Then I…I bet…ten years of my daughter's life!"

Xie Lian was stunned by those words and thought, *Where on earth is there a father who is willing to bet with the life of his child? Is that even possible?*

Behind the curtain, Hua Cheng only snorted. "Very well."

Xie Lian couldn't tell if it was his imagination, but he could sense coldness in that response. But then he added mentally, *San Lang said he always has good luck, and all his fortune sticks came up as the best of luck. If he bets against this man, won't he win for sure and take ten years of life from that man's daughter?*

He was just thinking this when the croupier announced sweetly by the long table: "Even is a loss, odd is a win. Once the cup is tipped, there is no turning back. Now, please."

As it turned out, Hua Cheng wouldn't be involved in the betting after all. That man shook the gambling cup haphazardly, both hands grasping hard, and the hall quieted down. The sounds of the dice rattling could be heard, loud and crisp. A long while after, his movement came to a sudden stop. Then, everything was still.

It was a long while before the man slowly—very slowly—lifted a corner of the gambling cup and peeked through the gap. Those bloodshot eyes suddenly widened.

He flipped open the cup and shouted with mad joy. "Odd! Odd! ODD!! I win! I've won! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA, I'VE WON! I'VE WON!!"

This was certainly not the outcome the crowd of humans and ghosts around the long table had wanted to see, and they started booing the man down, slapping the table and shouting their discontent.

One of the croupiers smiled and said, “Congratulations. Your business will soon see a turn for the better.”

The man laughed uproariously and cried, “Wait! I want to bet again!”

The croupier smiled. “You are welcome to. What do you want this time?”

The man pulled a long face, and he said, “I want…I want everyone competing with me in my trade to drop dead!”

Hearing this, the crowd started muttering and clicking their tongues. The croupier raised a hand to cover her smile.

“If that is what you desire, it is much more difficult to fulfill than your previous wish. Will you not consider something else? Asking for your business to flourish further, for example?”

Yet the man replied, his eyes red, “No! That’s the only thing I want to bet on! That’s what I’m betting for!”

“Then, if that is your wish, ten years of your daughter’s life may not be enough,” the croupier said.

“I’ll add more if that’s not enough, I’ll bet twenty years of her life! And…and the fate of her marriage too!”

The ghostly crowd was in an uproar, and they burst out laughing.

“This dad’s lost his mind! He’s selling his daughter!!”

“Wow, just wow!!”

The croupier announced once again, “Even is a loss, odd is a win. Once the cup is tipped, there is no turning back. Now, please!”

That man once again took up the gambling cup, trembling as he shook it. If he lost, his daughter would lose twenty years of her life and a perfectly good marriage, which was obviously not ideal…but if he won, all his competitors would drop dead? Although Xie Lian didn’t think Hua Cheng would ever let such a thing happen, after much hesitation, he stepped a little closer. He was just debating whether he should cast some small trick when suddenly, someone grabbed hold of him. He turned his head to see and found Shi Qingxuan.

Shi Qingxuan had returned to his male form, and he whispered, “Don’t be rash.”

Xie Lian whispered back, “Lord Wind Master, why did you transform back?”

“It’s a long story,” Shi Qingxuan sighed. “That group of girlies and aunties dragged me around saying they were going to introduce me to good beauty parlors. I finally escaped, but they caught me again, so I had to change back. They dragged me to a place that smeared so much stuff on my face, pulling, stretching, slapping, smacking—quick, check my face! How is it? Anything wrong? Do you see anything off?”

He pushed his face right up to Xie Lian for inspection, and Xie Lian dutifully scrutinized it before replying truthfully, “I think it looks even smoother and fairer than before.”

Shi Qingxuan brightened immediately. “Really? Oh, good! That’s wonderful! Ha ha ha ha! Is there a mirror? Where’s a mirror? I want to see!”

“Look later,” Xie Lian said. “Ghost City is blocking our spiritual communication, so let’s not lose each other again. By the way, how did you know I was here, Lord Wind Master?”

“I didn’t!” Shi Qingxuan replied. “I came because Qianqiu and I had already agreed to meet here. When we lost each other earlier, I just came here instead, but when I walked in, it turned out you were here too!”

“You called Qianqiu out?” Xie Lian asked. “To meet here?”

“Yeah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “Qianqiu is Lang Qianqiu, His Highness Tai Hua. You know that much at least, right? He’s the Martial God of the East. Since we’re here, it’ll be best if he comes too. The Gambler’s Den is one of the most bustling, chaotic places in Ghost City. It’s a landmark. People and ghosts alike go in and out in large numbers, so it’s much less conspicuous for us to mingle. That’s why I told him to meet us here.”

Xie Lian nodded. When he turned back to the long table, that man still hadn’t lifted the cup. His eyes were rolled back and he was muttering, not unlike many of the ghosts there. Xie Lian sighed.

“This man…”

Shi Qingxuan, still feeling his face, said, “I know what you want to say, and I agree. But Ghost City is Hua Cheng’s territory, and the rules here at the Den are all followed willingly. You gamble at your own risk. The heavens can do nothing. Let’s just observe for now, and we can come up with something if this gets out of hand.”

Xie Lian hummed, thinking that there was no way San Lang would allow this to get out of hand. It would truly be best just to observe. With that thought, he settled down.

As for the gambling man, he finally seemed to gather enough courage and lifted the cup just a sliver. The outcome was about to be revealed.

Just then, another person burst in and slammed the cup back down with a strike that crushed it to pieces! This strike not only crushed the gambling cup but also the hand that was on top of it. The entire table splintered with a deep crack.

The masked man cradled his crushed hand and rolled all over the floor screaming. The crowd of ghosts also started shouting, some cheering and some crying out in shock.

The person who had smashed their way in yelled, “You! What a vicious heart! A wish for wealth and fortune, fine. But to wish for others’ sudden death?! If you want to bet, have the guts to bet your own life—not the life and marriage of your daughter! You’re not fit to be a man! Not fit to be a father!”

The young man had straight, strong brows and stars for eyes, bursting with heroic aura. Although he was dressed in simple black attire, nothing extravagant, his air of nobility could not be concealed. It was none other than the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu.

From their spot in the crowd, Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan both covered their faces at the same time.

Xie Lian groaned. "…Lord Wind Master, did you not tell him…to be a little more cautious when he's here…and keep it low-key…"

Shi Qingxuan whined back, "…I…I told him, but…he's always like that… What can I do… Had I known earlier…I would've planned for us to come here together…"

Xie Lian sympathized. "I get it… I understand…"

Just then, Hua Cheng chuckled lightly from behind the curtains.

Xie Lian's heart skipped a beat.

The youth had often laughed when he was with Xie Lian, so now Xie Lian could judge fairly well when the laughter was genuine versus when it was mocking. Or when it was laced with killing intent.

His voice was languid. "You must have guts of steel to start trouble here in my territory."

Lang Qianqiu turned to face the direction of the voice with fire in his eyes. "Are you the owner of this Gambler's Den?"

The crowd jeered from all around.

"Ignorant child, do you know who you're talking to?! That's our Chengzhu!"

Someone sneered. "Not only does he own this Gambler's Den, the entire Ghost City is his!"

Lang Qianqiu barely showed any reaction when hearing this, but Shi Qingxuan was completely taken aback.

"Dear lord, is that who I think it is behind the curtain?! Crimson Rain Sought Flower?!"

Xie Lian answered, "Yes…it's him."

Shi Qingxuan asked again, "Are you sure?!"

Xie Lian replied, "I'm certain."

Shi Qingxuan panicked. "Crap, crap. What do we do about Qianqiu now?!"

Xie Lian said, after a few moments, "Let's just hope he doesn't expose his identity…"

Yet the more Lang Qianqiu looked around, the angrier he became. “This hellish place reeks of smoke and corruption, and it’s filled to the brim with demonic chaos. What scum is gathered here, committing what kind of deeds? Running a place like this, none of you have a single trace of humanity!”

The crowd booed in unison.

“We ain’t humans anyway, what do we need humanity for? What a useless concept—whoever wants it can take it!”

“Who do you think you are, coming all the way here just to insult us?!”

Amused, Hua Cheng said, “This den of mine is a carnival of hell to begin with. There’s a path for you in heaven, but you refuse to take it and instead chose to barge into the despairing depths of hell. So, what shall we do with you?”

The moment they heard the word “heaven,” Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan instantly knew. Just as they’d suspected, Hua Cheng had already seen through Lang Qianqiu and knew exactly where he came from!

Yet Lang Qianqiu completely missed the implication of his words and slammed his hand down on the table once more. He was standing at one end, and with that single strike, he sent the entire table flying toward the red shadow behind the curtain. Those who had been gathered around the table dodged to the sides, but the seated silhouette behind the curtain didn’t move. With a wave of his hand, the long table was flung back in the opposite direction, back toward Lang Qianqiu.

At the sight of the rebounding table, Lang Qianqiu caught it with one hand. But he quickly realized he couldn’t handle the overwhelming force bearing down against him and immediately switched to both hands. As he pushed and pushed, blue veins began to pop on his forehead. The once-bustling hall now had people and ghosts fleeing and hiding. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan debated whether they should step in to help. Since they hadn’t been exposed yet, they could continue to help out in secret, but if they jumped in openly, they’d risk having their covers blown completely.

On the other end, Lang Qianqiu gave a loud shout and finally shoved back the hefty table. Behind the red curtains, Hua Cheng’s silhouette was still lounging on the chair. He curled all five fingers into a fist, then released them lightly. Instantly, the table exploded into fragments of wood, the splinters shooting toward Lang Qianqiu.

The force of this gust flung forth countless splinters as sharp as knives, more fearful than any hidden weapon. If Lang Qianqiu were to keep his powers hidden and remain in his mortal form, there was no way he'd be able to evade the attack. Thus, moments later, his body started to emit a faint light. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan understood right away and panicked.

Oh no, he's going to reveal his true form!

But this faint sheen of spiritual light vanished as soon as it appeared. Lang Qianqiu had probably remembered that he wasn't supposed to reveal his identity on this trip and caught himself at the last second. He quickly withdrew his power, having barely stopped the flying splinters. However, while Lang Qianqiu had stepped back, Hua Cheng, on the other hand, would not. The crimson figure sitting leisurely behind the red curtain made another hand seal. This time, he pressed his fingers together and lightly flicked up.

With this one motion, Lang Qianqiu's body was suddenly lifted off the ground. Sprawled out like a starfish, his body was suspended on the ceiling of the great hall of the Gambler's Den.

Even after being caught, Lang Qianqiu still didn't seem to be able to wrap his head around how he suddenly started floating, and he struggled to break free, his face full of confusion. Xie Lian felt his head throb.

"Now that his power's been sealed, even if he wants to return to his divine form, it'll be impossible."

Shi Qingxuan agreed. "Since Ghost City is Hua Cheng's territory, if he wants to seal his power, he can."

Even though Lang Qianqiu had been apprehended before the crowd, there was at least one upside: namely, his identity was probably still safe for now. If he had continued the brawl and released his powers, it would be hard to explain why Tai Hua-zhenjun, the Martial God of the East, had come to Ghost City to wreak havoc. After all, unless there was something extraordinary afoot, the Heavenly and Ghost Realms hadn't crossed each other's paths in centuries.

Seeing that the Gambler’s Den’s unexpected guest had been detained, the crowd that had fled returned and gathered in the hall once more. They pointed at the suspended Lang Qianqiu and laughed uproariously. Lang Qianqiu had probably never experienced this kind of humiliation before, and his face flushed red as he wordlessly struggled against the invisible bindings. From time to time, a ghost from below would jump up in an attempt to pat his head. Fortunately, Hua Cheng had hung him fairly high up, far out of reach, sparing him that embarrassment.

Hua Cheng chuckled from behind the red curtains. “What an interesting catch today. I’ll let you all play with it. Whoever’s lucky and wins big can take it home to roast.”

At those words, endless cheers erupted within the hall.

“Bet on the roll! Let’s bet on the roll! The highest roll can take him home to roast!”

“Oh myyyy, this little gege looks pretty delicious, hee hee hee hee…”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha, who’s the fool now?! That’ll teach you to cause trouble around here!”

The four masked bouncers carried in a new long table, and the crowd flocked to the area once again to start the next round of bets. The masked man who was clutching his hand and howling on the ground was long forgotten. The prize this time around was none other than Lang Qianqiu, suspended in midair. Seeing how riled the crowd was, Shi Qingxuan paced back and forth, anxiously flailing his arms.

“What do we do? Should we go up there and win him back? Or is it better to fight?”

Xie Lian asked, “Lord Wind Master, how’s your luck?”

Shi Qingxuan replied, “It’s sometimes good, sometimes bad. There’s no certainty with something like luck.”

Xie Lian said, “There can be. For example, look at me. I’ve never had any good luck.”

Shi Qingxuan gaped. “Is it that bad?”

Xie Lian nodded, ruefully. “Whenever I roll, the most I get is snake eyes.”

Shi Qingxuan knitted his brows, but an idea immediately came to him, and he slapped his thigh. “How about this: since the most you ever get is snake eyes, then you should bet on the *lowest* number. There can’t be anyone who’ll roll lower than you.”

After a moment of consideration, Xie Lian agreed. “You have a good point. Let me try.”

So he found a place near the table and threw out a suggestion: “Why not switch the rules up a bit and see who can roll the smallest? The lowest roll wins, how about that?”

The crowd around the table was rowdy; some agreed, some disagreed. Xie Lian decided to take two dice and give it a try first.

Before he rolled, he chanted mentally: *small, small, small.* The dice were tossed, and the two leaned in to take a look.

Two sixes!

“…” said Xie Lian.

“…” said Shi Qingxuan.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead in defeat. “It seems that not even a change of rules can change my luck.”

Shi Qingxuan mirrored him in rubbing his forehead. “Maybe it’d be better to just fight outright.”

Just then, a croupier approached the red curtains and leaned in, as if trying to hear what the figure behind was saying. She nodded, raised her head, and announced, “Everyone, may I have your attention, please? Chengzhu has an announcement to make.”

Hearing that Chengzhu had something to say, the crowd immediately dropped everything and became exceedingly quiet.

The croupier continued, “Chengzhu said to change up the rules.”

Chatter broke out in the crowd.

“Chengzhu *is* the rule!”

“The rules are whatever Chengzhu says they are!”

“What are we changing them to?”

The croupier responded, “Chengzhu says that he is in a good mood today and wants to play a couple of rounds with everyone. Anyone is free to bet against him. Whoever wins can take home the thing up above. Whether to steam it, boil it, fry it, or pickle it will be completely up to the winner.”

Learning that they’d be betting against Chengzhu, the ghosts began to have second thoughts. It seemed that Hua Cheng indeed never stepped in to gamble himself. There were a few brave souls tempted to give it a shot, but not a single one of them dared to be first. Above them, Lang Qianqiu continued his struggles with endless determination.

He barked, “What do you mean, ‘thing’? I’m not a thing! You dare to use me as a bet?!”

This proclamation that he wasn’t a “thing” was heard by the many female ghosts in the crowd. Giggling, they stared at him with openly lecherous looks while running the tips of their blood-red tongues across their lips, as if they wanted to swallow him whole.

Xie Lian thought, *Hahh…this child. It’s better if you speak less.*

After a soundless sigh, Xie Lian stepped forward and said gently, “In that case, please let me have a try.”

Upon hearing his voice, the shadow behind the red curtains paused. Then the figure slowly rose to his feet.

The croupier in front of the curtains smiled. “Then, will this gongzi please come forth.”

Within the hall, the crowds of humans and ghosts all parted for this brave warrior. When Xie Lian reached the end of the path, the croupier presented him with the polished black gambling cup in her hands.

“Please go ahead, gongzi.”

To all the previous gamblers, she had always used a casual way of speaking. Despite the ordinary words she uttered, her tone wasn’t polite in the slightest. However, to Xie Lian now, not only had she started using honorifics, the tone she used was also exceedingly polite and respectful. Xie Lian received the black gambling cup from her with a word of thanks and lightly cleared his throat.

Since he had never touched anything of this sort before, he shook the cup randomly for a good while and pretended that he knew a thing or two. As he moved his hands, he looked up and glanced at Lang Qianqiu hanging above. Lang Qianqiu stared back at him, wide-eyed and pitiful, but thankfully, he didn't make a sound. His expression made Xie Lian want to laugh for some reason, but he held it back. After shaking for a long time, he finally stopped.

Countless pairs of eyes were intently focused on the cup in his hands, and Xie Lian felt that somehow, this tiny little gambling cup had grown incomparably heavy. He didn't know if there was a right way to flip it. However, just as he was about to reveal the outcome, the croupier stopped him.

"Wait."

"What is it?" Xie Lian asked.

The croupier replied, "Chengzhu said that your cup-shaking posture isn't quite right."

Xie Lian thought to himself, *So there really is a correct way of doing this? Could all my bad luck earlier be due to my bad posture?*

He asked modestly, "Then may I ask what the correct posture is?"

The croupier responded, "Chengzhu has invited you to come up, as he is willing to teach you, gongzi."

Upon hearing this, the crowd of ghosts within the den drew in sharp breaths.

Xie Lian heard the ghosts grumble.

"To think Chengzhu is going to teach him—that's a first! Does that mean he's gonna die?"

"Chengzhu wants to do *what*? Just who is this?! Why teach him?!"

"Shaking a cup is shaking a cup! What kind of correct posture is there?!"

Xie Lian was thinking the same question, but the croupier had already motioned him toward the red curtains.

"Please."

Thus, Xie Lian arrived in front of the red curtains with the black wooden gambling cup clutched in his hands.

The silk curtains swayed gently, almost giving life to the red silhouette. The person behind the curtains was standing directly in front of him with only half an arm’s distance between them. Xie Lian held his breath as a hand parted the heavy red curtains and landed perfectly under his own, supporting the gambling cup.

This was a right hand, slender and pale, and the well-defined fingers had a red string tied around the third digit. Against the pitch-black wooden cup, the white appeared even paler and the red even more vivid.

Slowly, Xie Lian lifted his eyes. A youth, roughly eighteen or nineteen years of age, stood silently behind the cloudlike red silk curtains.

It was San Lang.

His robes were still the same maple red, his skin still white as snow. It was the same uniquely handsome and dangerously sharp, youthful face, but its contours were now slightly more defined. While he could still be called a youth, he could also be called a man. The shyness of boyhood had evolved into a composed calm. The sheer wildness between his brows reflected his pride. The same eye that twinkled like a star was now gazing deeply, unblinkingly at Xie Lian.

However, though it was as bright as a star, there was only one eye. The left eye.

The other was hidden behind a black eyepatch.

The red silk curtains were only open a small slit. In his position, Xie Lian was the only one who could make out the person behind the curtains, since he was blocking the view from everyone else in the hall—not that they would dare to sneak a peek, anyway. That left eye watched Xie Lian, and Xie Lian returned the gaze, subconsciously drawn to it.

This time, Hua Cheng looked not only a few years older, but he’d also grown taller. Before, when Xie Lian looked at him, he could maintain eye contact comfortably, but now he had to strain his neck to look up.

After they had both stared for a good, long while, Hua Cheng finally broke the silence.

He said in a deep voice, “Would you like to bet high or low?”

It was this deep voice, pleasant to the ear, that pulled Xie Lian back to reality. As it made no difference how he bet, he answered, “High.”

“Fine,” Hua Cheng replied. “Then I’ll roll first.”

Xie Lian’s left hand supported the base of the black gambling cup while his right hand covered the circular lid. Hua Cheng stood in front of him, and with his right hand covering Xie Lian’s left, he guided him to shake lightly before lifting the lid. There were two dice at the bottom of the cup, a six and a five.

Lang Qianqiu, from where he was hanging above them, had a clear view and saw how easily he rolled such a high number. His eyes widened, and he exclaimed in awe, “How did that happen?!”

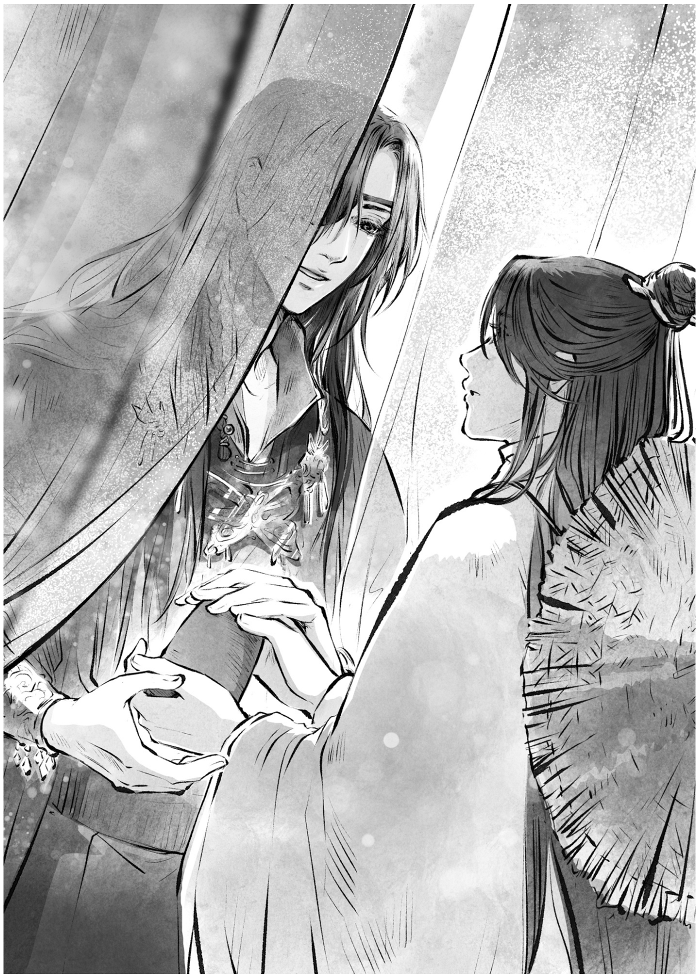
Hua Cheng loosened his hand slightly and beckoned to Xie Lian. “Shake it like this. Now you try.”

Xie Lian mirrored his actions and shook the cup twice, but Hua Cheng said, “Not like that.”

Even though he was reprimanding Xie Lian, his tone was exceptionally gentle and patient. As he explained, Hua Cheng supported Xie Lian’s hand with his own again, but this time, his left hand found its way to Xie Lian’s right, the one covering the lid.

He instructed softly, “Like this.”

And just like that, the backs of Xie Lian’s hands were enveloped by Hua Cheng’s palms.



When skin touched skin, Hua Cheng's hands felt temperate like jade. The exquisite silver vambraces that Hua Cheng wore were as cold as ice, and yet his movements were careful, and he never allowed them to touch Xie Lian's skin. His hands guided Xie Lian's and shook the black wooden gambling cup in a rhythm that was neither hurried nor slow.

Once, twice, thrice.

Clack, clack, clack.

There was a crisp, rattling sound of the two dice colliding and entangling with each other as they bounced inside the black cup. Even though the shakes were gentle, Xie Lian could feel waves of numbness traveling from the backs of his hands, along his arms, spreading through the rest of his body.

As he shook, Xie Lian lifted his eyes to sneak a peek at the other person and realized that Hua Cheng wasn't looking at the gambling cup at all. Instead, he was watching him intently with the corners of his mouth curved up. Xie Lian couldn't help but return that smile, but he immediately controlled himself when he remembered the crowd of humans and ghosts watching him from above and below. He lowered his head and diligently studied the gesture that Hua Cheng showed him.

"Like this?" he asked.

The smile curving Hua Cheng's lips deepened. "Hm. That's right, just like that."

After Xie Lian shook the cup a few more times, full of hope, he suggested, "Why don't you take a look?"

Xie Lian lifted the lid and saw two white dice at the base. It was two threes.

Rolling two threes was already an impossible feat for him. It was like a gentle spring breeze had brushed past Xie Lian's heart, and he thought, *Could I have actually learned the trick?*

However, as shocking as the outcome was, six was still slightly less than eleven. He cleared his throat and admitted, "I'm sorry, I've lost."

But Hua Cheng replied, "Don't worry, this round doesn't count. I'm teaching you right now, try again."

At those words, Lang Qianqiu and Shi Qingxuan gawked. The crowd of ghosts in the hall also stared with their mouths agape, then they started to grumble.

"What's with Chengzhu? I thought he was gonna show him who's boss, but he's actually teaching him for real?!"

"How can you not count this round?! Can you even gamble like that?"

"If this doesn't count, when *will* it count?"

"Looks like Chengzhu really is in a good mood today…"

Hua Cheng quirked his left brow, and the croupier standing to the side immediately shushed the crowd.

"Everyone, please quiet down."

In the blink of an eye, the hall went silent again. Although no one dared speak, their stares were more intense. Hua Cheng chuckled and softly whispered words of encouragement into Xie Lian's ear.

"Again?"

It might have been because there were too many humans and ghosts packed into this Gambler's Den, but Xie Lian felt his face starting to heat up.

"Okay."

Rattle, rattle, he shook twice more. This time, when he revealed the cup, it was two fours.

"See, isn't it a little higher this time?" Hua Cheng asked.

Although Xie Lian felt that something was off, he still nodded his head. "Yes…it's a little higher."

Hua Cheng encouraged, "You did well. Keep going."

With those words of encouragement coming one after another, for some reason, giggles could be heard all around the hall. Judging by the voices, it appeared they all came from female ghosts. Xie Lian also couldn't figure out what exactly constituted the correct posture. At first, he simplemindedly paid close attention to how Hua Cheng positioned his hands, how he managed the pace, and how he grasped the cup. But now, he was letting Hua Cheng's hands lead him and shook the dice blindly. As he shook, a suspicion in his mind grew stronger and stronger: *Could San Lang be teasing me…?*

Lang Qianqiu, who had been watching from above, probably felt the same and couldn't help but speak up. "You! Stop shaking the cup. He's obviously playing you. There's no such thing as a correct posture. He must be cheating!"

Hearing that loud, boisterous voice, Shi Qingxuan covered his face again.

The ghosts below shushed heartily, and a rain of dice was hurled at Lang Qianqiu. They jeered at him loudly.

"Ignorant child, stop talking!"

"So noisy! We're just getting to the exciting part!"

"That Daozhang's rolls get higher each time he follows our Chengzhu's teachings, that's the undeniable truth!"

"That's right! What do you know?!"

Lang Qianqiu was furious. "You, you unruly, bald-faced liars… *Aaah!!*"

He suddenly stopped mid-sentence, and his face turned bright red. A couple of female ghosts below him had brutally yanked on his dangling belt and scolded him aloud.

"Xiao-didi,[4] stop causing a ruckus. If you keep on spouting nonsense, us jiejie will pull off your pants!"

Lang Qianqiu had never been threatened like this before and was so angry he was rendered speechless. "You…you!!"

Getting beaten to a pulp by a mob of ghosts would've been fine, but having his pants pulled off would be a dreadful embarrassment for a dignified martial god like him. Immediately, Lang Qianqiu didn't dare to say anything more. Xie Lian looked up and saw the other god sending him eye signals with all his might. It was both hilarious and pitiful, so he could only lower his head.

Xie Lian looked at Hua Cheng and pleaded in a small voice, "…San Lang."

Hearing his tone, Hua Cheng chuckled. "Leave him be. Let us continue."

"…"

Xie Lian gave up and, once again, held the cup and shook twice. As expected, this time, he got two fives.

The crowd cheered harder at this and their teasing of Lang Qianqiu grew more frenzied.

"Did you see that? Higher than last time!"

But Xie Lian had already realized that Hua Cheng was just fooling around with him. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He was sure that there was indeed no such thing as a correct posture, and to someone like him, any posture would be incorrect. From here on, he might as well give up on any hope of transforming his luck.

Just as he was about to give up and expose himself on this last shake, Hua Cheng stopped him.

"Wait."

Xie Lian could feel the hands covering his pressing down a little harder, so he stopped moving altogether. "What's wrong?"

Hua Cheng asked, half-jokingly, "I don't believe this gege has mentioned what will happen should he lose?"

Hearing him call Xie Lian "gege," Shi Qingxuan and Lang Qianqiu both wore complicated expressions on their faces. The crowd of ghosts also felt massive shivers run down their spines, and there were even a few who were so shocked that their heads dropped to the ground.

It was a little embarrassing to say, but because he was in such a hurry before, Xie Lian hadn't considered his side of the bet.

"Um…"

At first, he considered also betting ten years of his life, but a heavenly official's life span was quite long, so ten years probably wasn't worth very much. Money or treasure? He didn't have any. Spiritual power?

He didn’t have much of that either. Xie Lian surprisingly couldn’t think of anything he could bet with at the moment, so he could only ask advice from the owner of the Gambler’s Den.

“Do you think there’s anything on me that’s worth betting with?”

Hua Cheng chuckled at his question. “Anything’s fine. What have you got on you?”

Xie Lian pondered briefly, then lightly coughed and told the truth: “I…only have a half-eaten bun with me.”

Hua Cheng burst out laughing. Even though he laughed, no one else dared to do the same, even if they wanted to.

When he finally settled down, Hua Cheng nodded. “That’s fine. The bun will do.”

The moment he spoke those words, they not only shocked the crowd of ghosts but the croupiers at the gambling table as well.

Since the opening of this Gambler’s Den, there had been countless inconceivable bets made: organs, life span, emotions, abilities…but none were as inconceivable as the one today, a half-eaten bun.

Even Lang Qianqiu couldn’t contain his surprise, and he sputtered, dumbfounded, “What…what’s the meaning of this? Are you saying that I…that I’m only worth a half-eaten bun?!”

The crowd snickered and laughed. Someone called out, “What’s wrong with a bun? You’re getting off easy, so shut up!”

Xie Lian could tell that despairing voice belonged to Shi Qingxuan, who was hiding among the crowd of ghosts. Just as he was caught between laughing or crying, Hua Cheng coaxed him to continue.

“Come. It’s the last round. Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous,” Xie Lian argued.

The two stayed like that, hands still touching, and shook a few times. Even though Xie Lian was truly not nervous, there was still a light sheen of sweat on the hand sandwiched between the cup and Hua Cheng’s palm. Finally, the movement came to a stop. It was time for the reveal. He drew a small breath, then opened the lid—

The dice were two sixes!

Xie Lian let out a sigh of relief, aware of what had transpired, and he gazed up at Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng arched his brows.

“Oh, I lost.”

Even though he acted serious when admitting his loss, he didn’t sound the least bit sincere. The crowd below was engulfed in silence.

There’d been people grumbling earlier, “If this round doesn’t count, then when will it count?” Now, the answer was clear: it counts when this guy wins.

That level of generosity was almost insane!

Even so, no one dared to comment. The croupier from before took the black wooden gambling cup and raised it up high.

“Congratulations to this gongzi. You have won this round.”

Everyone generously gave face and cheered.

“Chengzhu showed us a perfect loss! Beautiful!”

“Wasn’t the winner personally taught by Chengzhu? He won because Chengzhu taught him well!”

“That’s right! Learning the correct dice rolling posture today really opened my eyes! So much benefit gained! So much that it’d take more than ten years to reap it all!”

Listening to the voices of the swarming devils from all around, Xie Lian couldn’t help but smile. Seeing his mirth, Hua Cheng also chuckled and gave the red curtains a flick.

At that point, Lang Qianqiu called out from above, “Since you lost, you should be letting me down!”

Hua Cheng continued to stare at Xie Lian, his smile unchanging and his gaze not moving from Xie Lian’s own. He simply lifted his hand and gave an easy wave, and Lang Qianqiu came crashing heavily down. Xie Lian winced at the loud crash. Shi Qingxuan couldn’t risk exposing himself, so he couldn’t rush forward. Instead, Xie Lian turned and bent down to check up on the god.

“Are you okay?”

Lang Qianqiu crawled to his feet and dusted himself off. “I’m good, thank you. He probably wanted you to go up there so that he could cheat and make you lose—but thank goodness you won!”

Xie Lian thought, *You’re completely mistaken. If he didn’t go easy on me, even if the whole world turned to ash, I would still never be able to win you back…*

Just as he was thinking that, there was suddenly a crisp tinkling of bells, and the sound was followed by gasps of shock from all around. Xie Lian turned his head to look, and it turned out that Hua Cheng had finally emerged from behind the red silk curtains.

In his previous youthful form, Hua Cheng always sported a slightly crooked ponytail. But now, his raven-black locks tumbled loose over his vibrant red clothing, and an evil aura radiated from his handsome figure. Only a thin braid on the right side, tied at the end with a red coral bead, brought a hint of mischief to the mix. The vambraces were silver, the straps on his boots were silver, the belt was also silver, even the long, slender scimitar that hung at his waist was silver, its curve smooth and peculiar. Just like that long, slender blade, the man himself was slender and tall. He was leaning against the parted curtains with crossed arms and a faint smile.

“Gege, you’ve beaten me.”

Xie Lian obviously knew what had happened and said in resignation, “Please stop teasing me.”

Hua Cheng quirked his brow. “I’m not. Why would I?”

Down below, the crowd of ghosts were bustling with excitement, bubbling like boiling water, each of them thrilled as they whispered among themselves.

“Chengzhu changed his skin again today?”

“I’m dying, his new skin is killing me! It’s so tender and firm!”

“What do you mean, ‘dying’? Old hag, aren’t you already dead?!”

It would seem that Hua Cheng never showed his true form in public and also changed skins frequently. None of the ghosts in Ghost City knew what he really looked like, and they assumed that this must be another of his fake skins. Only Xie Lian knew that the one standing before him was the genuine Crimson Rain Sought Flower of legend.

Xie Lian stared at the young man in red.

“You…”

He wanted to say something, but countless eyes from all around were focused on them, and Hua Cheng’s attitude was incredibly ambiguous—like he knew him but also didn’t.

Xie Lian didn’t know if Hua Cheng could so publicly admit their acquaintance in Ghost City, didn’t know if he was acting this way intentionally. So he couldn’t say much other than “Thank you.”

“Why thank him?” Lang Qianqiu demanded. “He owns this place; he bore ill intentions from the start.”

“…” Xie Lian replied under his breath. “Your Highness, please stop talking and let’s get out of here.”

If they were to stick around, he really didn’t know what else would come out of Lang Qianqiu’s mouth. Considering the mission at hand, Xie Lian couldn’t afford to stay long. He glanced at Hua Cheng a few more times and pushed Lang Qianqiu toward the exit. But as he was doing so, Hua Cheng’s voice called after him.

“Hold it.”

Xie Lian stopped in his tracks and looked back. The chatter among the crowd started up again.

“Chengzhu, you can’t let them go like this!”

“That guy’s suspicious. Look how strong he is. He’s probably not as simple as he seems. If you ask me, they need to be kept and interrogated.”

“Exactly! Who knows if he’s a spy sent from whatever organization to cause trouble on our turf!”

That last sentence was a dagger to the heart. They really did come from the heavens, but their intent wasn’t to cause trouble but rather to simply investigate the situation. Xie Lian wasn’t sure if Hua Cheng had seen the spiritual light that Lang Qianqiu released in his moment of peril, and he wasn’t a hundred percent certain Hua Cheng would let them go if he did see. Xie Lian was growing increasingly anxious, but the tone Hua Cheng spoke in was laid-back.

"Shouldn't you leave the prize behind?"

Xie Lian was lost. "Prize?"

Lang Qianqiu put himself in front of Xie Lian and questioned warily, "Are you going back on your word now?"

But Xie Lian thought, *San Lang would never go back on his promises. Could he mean something else?*

With that, he stepped out from behind Lang Qianqiu and asked, "But didn't I already win the bet?"

"It's true that gege won against me just now," Hua Cheng replied. "But don't forget, you lost a round before that."

Xie Lian blinked. "But you said not to worry because it didn't count, right?"

Even though it took some really thick skin to say something as embarrassing as "It doesn't count when I lose, only when I win," Xie Lian still said it.

Hua Cheng replied, "Of course, the rounds when you bet against me didn't count. What I'm referring to is the first round that you gambled at the long table."

It was then that Xie Lian finally remembered. Hua Cheng was referring to when he was testing out the lowest he could roll and ended up throwing double sixes instead.

Lang Qianqiu spat darkly, "I told you he had ill intentions and wouldn't let us leave here that easily. I will not be sealed again."

It sounded like he was already prepared for another fight and was eager to jump at the chance, but Xie Lian quickly pulled him back.

"It's fine, don't be nervous. We don't need to use our fists."

On the other end, Hua Cheng tilted his head. "How about it? Gege, do you admit your loss?"

Willing to bet, willing to lose; other than obediently conceding his defeat, what could he do? And so Xie Lian nodded.

"I admit it."

Hua Cheng extended his left hand with an open palm. "Then give me the promised prize."

The…promised prize?

After some hesitation, Xie Lian reached into his left sleeve, felt around, and fished out a half-eaten bun. Unable to look Hua Cheng in the eye, he bold-facedly presented it.

"Did you mean…this?"

Truth be told, when he took out the bun, Xie Lian felt the thick skin he'd grown over his eight hundred years crumble a little, unable to hold up.

The ghosts in the hall had long since been stricken speechless and were quietly watching this play out. Never mind that it was Chengzhu's first time betting against someone, and the stakes were a half-eaten bun—maybe Chengzhu was just having a bit of fun. But to think that Chengzhu had actually, in all seriousness, pursued the person to ask for this bun? Speechless. There really was nothing to say. There were even ghosts who couldn't help but spin an absurd theory: either there was some sort of enormous secret hidden within that bun or this person was actually Chengzhu's older blood brother!

Hua Cheng, however, merely grinned broadly as he received the bun, gave it a look, and waved it around in his hand. "I've claimed my prize."

Seeing that he actually took it, Xie Lian didn't know what to say. A good moment passed before he responded.

"It's…cold. And maybe a little hard."

"That's okay. I don't mind," Hua Cheng said.

Such an answer left Xie Lian unable to respond, and since he had already said all he could, he turned around and headed toward the exit. Earlier, when the ghosts of the Gambler's Den parted for him, it was simply because he was the first to go up, and that made him a brave warrior. Now, when they parted for him, their eyes were filled with admiration and curiosity.

As Xie Lian left, he could hear the ghosts behind him ask, "Chengzhu, Chengzhu, where are you headed now?"

Hua Cheng replied lazily, “I am in an agreeable mood today. To Paradise Manor.”

At his response, the hall erupted into festive cheers. Xie Lian couldn’t help taking another glance back. Hua Cheng had also turned around, still with that half-eaten bun in his hand. He gave it a playful toss, then casually took a bite out of it, his gaze locked on Xie Lian as he did so.

Xie Lian’s step faltered at the sight. For some reason, he suddenly felt that sticking around here a moment longer would be a very bad idea. He quickened his pace, running out and dragging Lang Qianqiu in tow.

The two left the Gambler’s Den and ran like madmen down a long stretch of the road, almost knocking over several food stalls along the way. Just when they had finally arrived at a quiet, far-removed alley, Shi Qingxuan popped up and reunited with them. Shi Qingxuan fanned himself with such vigor that his hair whirled wildly in the wind.

“That was close, *so* close. My god, that was so scary my face turned as white as those ghosts’.”

Xie Lian’s heart was racing too. Perhaps he ran too hard.

Lang Qianqiu spoke up. “Yeah, Lord Wind Master. Your face still seems very pale right now.”

Shi Qingxuan felt his face and smiled. “Is that so? Ha ha ha ha, this isn’t from fright, it’s just what I was born with—ahem! Qianqiu, you’re a martial god who watches over a territory, you know that, right? How could you act so rashly? We’re in the middle of the Ghost Realm here! If you were caught and exposed, the word going out would be that heavenly officials in disguise were infiltrating the Ghost Realm, disrupting the peace between the three realms with their bizarre behavior! How could we explain that to the Emperor?”

Lang Qianqiu hung his head obediently and admitted his wrongdoing. “I’m sorry. I was too rash earlier.” Then he raised his head. “But those gamblers were crazy. If that man had flipped the cup, whether he won or lost, the outcome would have been terrible. Either his rivals or his daughter would suffer the consequences. It was that anger that made me crush the cup.”

Shi Qingxuan chided, “Even so, you shouldn’t have jumped in by yourself, right?”

Lang Qianqiu blinked. “Then what should I have done, Lord Wind Master? If I didn’t charge in, no one else would have.”

His question was so genuine that Shi Qingxuan didn’t know how to respond. He tapped his fan lightly against his temple. “Well…”

Xie Lian smiled softly. “Forget it.”

Lang Qianqiu looked at him. Xie Lian continued, “I think that even if His Highness Tai Hua was caught, he wouldn’t have confessed his identity no matter how he was interrogated. But to prevent others from picking up any clues from your words, it would be best for Your Highness to be prudent and avoid capture going forward.”

Lang Qianqiu nodded. “Okay! I understand.”

Shi Qingxuan said, “All right, let’s not talk about this anymore. Oh, right, Your Highness…”

This “Your Highness” made both Xie Lian and Lang Qianqiu turn their heads at the same time, and Shi Qingxuan clarified, “Oh, I meant the elder.”

“…” Xie Lian rubbed his forehead a little dejectedly. *Elder… All right, I* am *a little older, but not by that much. Why is it that when they talk about me, they always make it sound like I’m a grandpa?*

Shi Qingxuan continued, “Your Highnesses, have you two met at the Palace of Divine Might? If not, let me introduce you. This is the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu, Martial God of the East. This is the Crown Prince of Xianle, Xie Lian, a heavenly official who collects… collects…collects great commendation from the Heavenly Emperor.”

Even though Shi Qingxuan stumbled and didn’t say the words, Xie Lian knew exactly what came after: “collects scraps,” what else! Since the words were abruptly swapped in mid-sentence, there was no time to adjust the grammar, only clumsily change the course of the statement.

When Lang Qianqiu heard, however, he looked at Xie Lian and asked in amazement, “So you’re That Highness who ascended three times?”

It appeared that Lang Qianqiu really had slept through the entire meeting at the Palace of Divine Might and didn’t even remember who he was. Anyone else saying that to Xie Lian would no doubt mean it as a sarcastic comment. But because the question came from Lang Qianqiu, Xie Lian wholeheartedly believed that this child genuinely thought ascending three times was just a bit curious.

His eyes twinkled. “Yes, that would be me.”

Lang Qianqiu responded, “Thanks so much for helping me earlier! If you hadn’t…”

He remembered something and hurriedly looked down and started to tuck his belt in, tying it properly, fear still lingering.

He obviously didn’t think much about the history between the Kingdom of Xianle and the Kingdom of Yong’an. Shi Qingxuan seemed to think that introduction was good enough. He turned to Xie Lian.

“Your Highness, I thought that Crimson Rain Sought Flower knew you? Why did he act as if he didn’t back there?”

Lang Qianqiu finished tying his belt. “Was that really Crimson Rain Sought Flower? Was that his true form?”

Xie Lian didn’t even have time to open his mouth before Shi Qingxuan piped up.

“How could it be his true form? Hua Cheng has thousands of disguises, and no one knows what his true form looks like. Last time when I was at Banyue Pass, he looked similar to his appearance today, so this must be a fake skin too. It’s fake, all fake.”

Yet Xie Lian could still remember that night at Puqi Shrine, when Hua Cheng had told him, “The next time we meet, I’ll greet you in my true form.”

He thought to himself, *It’s real.*

But of course, he didn’t say that out loud. Everyone was so sure that Hua Cheng must be wearing a fake skin. Being the only one who knew it was Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s true form was like learning an extraordinary little secret.

Then he thought, *San Lang's appearance doesn't look that much different from before, only a bit older and taller. That means he was pretty much in his true form the first time he met me.*

Strangely, that made Xie Lian feel a little happy.

Shi Qingxuan added, "Everyone says Hua Cheng is a strange character, and that really seems to be true. It was obvious that he was going easy on you, and yet he pretended in all seriousness not to know you. Who knows what he's up to? Could it be that he wanted us to drop our guard?"

Xie Lian choked and coughed. Just as he thought, anyone could tell Hua Cheng was going easy on him back at the Gambler's Den. But rather than saying "he went easy on him," they might as well just say outright that Hua Cheng was literally letting him win. Lang Qianqiu was the only one who couldn't tell. He frowned.

"Did he go easy on him? Why?"

The other two patted him on the shoulder and decided with great tacit understanding that it was best not to explain it to him. They left Lang Qianqiu standing there by himself to mull over why Hua Cheng would go easy on Xie Lian and whether it was because the two knew each other. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan turned and walked off.

"We've been discovered now, I guess," Xie Lian said. "What's our next plan of action? Switch our disguises and try again? Personally, I don't think doing that will change anything. After His Highness Tai Hua's fight back there, Ghost City will probably strengthen their security."

Shi Qingxuan replied, "To be honest, I had considered the possibility of us getting exposed, but I never thought it would happen this soon."

Xie Lian sighed. "I know, I know."

"What's done is done," Shi Qingxuan said. "Since our cover is blown, you might as well just walk in with confidence and do this openly."

Xie Lian could vaguely guess what he had meant by "openly."

Sure enough, Shi Qingxuan explained, "If we want to smooth out the lie, then the only way is to have you go find Hua Cheng and tell him that you came here specifically to visit him. He knows that you're a heavenly official, right? If so, then it's believable to say that you've brought a couple of your little friends from heaven with you."

Yet unexpectedly, before Xie Lian could answer, Lang Qianqiu cried out at the suggestion, "No!"

Shi Qingxuan looked at him. "Why not?"

Lang Qianqiu replied seriously, "Your Highness Xianle, do you really know Crimson Rain Sought Flower? I heard your conversation earlier; it seems you two are friends."

Xie Lian nodded.

"Then of course that plan is not feasible!" Lang Qianqiu said. "Even though a ghost king is no saint, the fact that he went easy on you must mean that he sees you as a friend. And one should never deceive a friend."

Shi Qingxuan could feel an oncoming headache. "My god, Qianqiu, you stubborn mule!"

Yet Xie Lian laughed and nodded. "It's good. What His Highness Tai Hua said."

Lang Qianqiu beamed. "You agree with me, right?"

"How is that right?" Shi Qingxuan protested. "The three of us are heavenly officials, you know. If we report back empty-handed, people will no doubt say that our success rate is even lower than the Palace of Ling Wen's. And what an utter embarrassment that would be."

Xie Lian grinned, but just as he was about to speak, a terrible ruckus erupted from behind them and made the three turn their heads. Just outside of the alley, a mob of nefarious creatures ran past with raised fists, shouting.

"Where's that brat with the bandaged face? Where is he?"

Seeing the other two gods' alarm, Xie Lian reassured, "Don't worry, they're not after us."

Just as the words left his lips, their ears were pierced by a shrill, deafening cry.

Chapter 15:
At Paradise Manor, Questions of Xianle

THAT SHARP CRY of desperation made Xie Lian's heart drop. He had hardly gathered his thoughts before his body was already charging in that direction. Outside the alley, there were a bunch of oddly shaped, sinister creatures gathered in a circle, yelling one after another.

"We caught him!"

"Beat him to a pulp again!"

"Fuck! However much food this little scumbag pilfered off me, I'm gonna slice the same off him, every single bit!"

Shi Qingxuan caught up. "Your Highness, what's going on?"

Xie Lian didn't respond. He walked toward the group step by step, his pace growing in speed, and soon he broke into a run. He forcefully pushed past a couple of ghosts on the outside of the circle and saw that the one getting beaten was a boy dressed in tattered clothes. Judging by his size, he appeared to be around fifteen or sixteen years old, and he was curled up on the ground trembling uncontrollably.

Even though he clung tightly to his head, the layers of bandages that were messily wrapped around it were still visible. The bandages were covered in dirt, the same as his hair.

Wasn't this the same bandaged boy that Xie Lian had briefly met at Mount Yujun, the boy who had run off and couldn't be found?

No wonder the Palace of Ling Wen had been saying they couldn't find any trace of him. How could Heaven's Palace of Ling Wen find him in the Mortal Realm if the boy had escaped to the Ghost Realm's territory?

The ghosts that had been pushed aside by Xie Lian were outraged and shoved him out again, just as one of them moved to yank on the bandages on that boy's head.

"This little beggar is probably a freak, even uglier than me! Look how scared he is of people pulling these things off his face…"

Lang Qianqiu was furious. “What are you doing?!” he cried, then he walked up and hurled a few ghosts off to one side.

Shi Qingxuan didn’t have time to stop him and could only wave around with his fan. “Qianqiu, I thought we agreed not to act so impulsively!”

This time around, Qianqiu had riled up even more ghosts than before. “Where the hell did you come from?” they roared as they tackled him.

“I’m sorry, Lord Wind Master,” Lang Qianqiu called. “This will be the last time!” Then he jumped into the fight, whacking the ghosts about.

Shi Qingxuan let out an exasperated sigh. “Ugh, I’m never going on a mission with you again!” After that, of course he also had to join the brawl.

Annoyingly, they couldn’t use any spells—lest they give off spiritual light—so they had to resort to fighting with fists and feet. A smaller part of the group that was still beating up the boy was forcibly broken up by Xie Lian. He knelt, wanting to help the boy up.

“Are you all right?”

Upon hearing his voice, the boy shuddered and took a peek at him from his fetal position. Now that Xie Lian could see his face, he finally noticed that the bandages wrapped around the boy’s head were thoroughly drenched in blood. With patches of black and red, it was a frightening sight, an appearance more terrifying than when they had last parted. The two big eyes peeping out of the gaps between the bandages were rapt, black iris against the white, unusually clear. And yet those ink-black eyes that reflected Xie Lian’s silhouette were filled with terror.

Xie Lian took the boy by the arm. “Come, stand up. Everything is fine now.”

To his surprise, the boy screamed, shoved Xie Lian away, leapt to his feet, and bolted.

Since this boy had once been infected with Human Face Disease, he must have a connection to the Kingdom of Xianle. Xie Lian’s mind shivered at the mere sight of him, and he couldn’t help but be a little dazed. Caught off guard by the force of the push, even his bamboo hat fell to the ground.

After the initial shock, he called out, “Wait!”

Just as Xie Lian was about to give chase, the few ghosts that he had pulled away earlier grabbed on to him. The boy headed down the street, which was livelier than ever. At the rate that he was effortlessly weaving through the groups of ghouls and ghosts with his small frame, he would disappear soon. It would be difficult for Ruoye to track down a person in this kind of setting, so in that split-second of urgency, Xie Lian called out behind him.

“My lords, I’ll leave this matter with you. Let’s separate for now. Go hide and we’ll meet here again in three days at the latest!”

Ruoye slid out and sent those ghosts flying in the direction of the other two officials, while Xie Lian bent over slightly, picked up his bamboo hat, and set off running in the direction of the boy.

He squeezed through the crowd with immense difficulty, shouting all the while, “Excuse me! Excuse me!”

Because the boy had spent most of his life hiding and dodging in the Mortal Realm, escaping was practically second nature to him. His head could be seen in one second, then there was a shadow the next, and after that, there was nothing more; he was getting farther and farther away. Xie Lian didn’t know if it was his imagination, but he felt that the crowds on the street were getting thicker by the minute. With humans and ghosts alike pressed against each other, it made it really difficult for him to jostle through. Xie Lian’s mind was in disarray, so he knocked over a number of stalls, and he cried “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” as he continued to run.

Ghosts weren’t to be crossed carelessly, however, and they yelled after him, “Sorry does shit! Catch him!”

Xie Lian suddenly felt a chill on his back as if a hand had seized him, and he immediately knocked it back. “Who is it?!”

The hand was a tentacle that had come out of nowhere, and a mob of ghosts came swarming, their screeching and rough voices surrounding him.

“Hey, hey, hey! Let’s teach this little pretty boy a thing or two! How dare he start shit in Ghost City!”

A large, dense crowd of nefarious creatures poured onto the street. Seeing that he was about to lose the boy in the crowd, Xie Lian did his best to throw off the tentacle that caught him.

"Everyone! I'm really sorry. I don't mean any harm. Please allow me to find someone, and we can discuss reparations afterward?"

The horde of ghosts was relentless. "You wish!"

In all the pushing and pulling, the boy had disappeared completely. Xie Lian was dazed, not quite sure what he was feeling. Was it disappointment at not being able to catch the boy, or was it relief that a nightmare had passed once more?

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the ghost crowd. They immediately parted, forming a path, as if someone of importance had arrived. Xie Lian came to his senses and saw a tall, black-clad figure walking straight toward him through the path created by the mob.

That person yelled, "Settle down. Let him go!"

The black-clad figure, like most of the ghosts on the street, wore a mask. It was a funny mask, with a face that was contorted as if it was smiling woefully. The mob muttered under their breath, "It's the Waning Moon Officer!", and they released their hold on Xie Lian at last. It seemed this black-clad figure was someone significant in Ghost City.

The moment he approached Xie Lian, he bowed. "Greetings, Daozhang. Chengzhu wishes to see you."

"Huh? Me?" Xie Lian pointed at himself.

The Waning Moon Officer replied, "Yes. Chengzhu has been waiting for you at Paradise Manor."

All around them, the mob sucked in their breath.

"Chengzhu wants to see him? Did I hear that right?"

"Paradise Manor? That's Chengzhu's sanctuary—he's never had guests there!"

Someone who had come from a different street pointed out, "Wait a sec, isn't he the one who won against Chengzhu today at the Gambler's Den? I mean…the one Chengzhu educated?!"

All eyes were now focused on Xie Lian, each pair bigger than the next, forcing Xie Lian to raise the bamboo hat in his hand to hide from the stares.

The Waning Moon Officer beckoned. “This way please.”

Xie Lian nodded and followed him.

The crowd parted once more, and the Waning Moon Officer led Xie Lian through the path. No one dared follow, and after an incense time, the two had left the bustling street behind and made their way further into a quieter, more remote part of the city.

During their walk, the two barely conversed. The Waning Moon Officer walked as though he was going to disappear into the shadows at any moment, so Xie Lian followed closely. As his eyes swept idly past the officer’s wrist, he abruptly noticed that it bore a black cursed circle.

It was something he was more than familiar with.

A cursed shackle?!

His eyes widened, but he was silent in his shock. Just then, the Waning Moon Officer spoke up.

“We are here.”

Xie Lian looked up and realized he had been led to a lake. There were haunting will-o’-the-wisps floating above the waters, playing around and chasing each other. Next to the lake stood a large, resplendent mansion.

The Heavenly Realm and the Ghost Realm both possessed glamorous architecture. However, the glamour of the Heavens put an emphasis on prominence and prestige, whereas the glamour of Ghost City lay in bewitching frivolity. Even the large characters displaying the name of this mansion, “Paradise Manor,” emitted an evil aura.

Strange music came from the inside, airy and soft, incredibly enchanting, as if there were many women giggling and teasing, singing and dancing languidly in play.

Following the music, Xie Lian entered the mansion slowly. After raising a beaded curtain, warm perfumed air came rushing at his face. Xie Lian turned his head slightly to avoid getting engulfed in the scent.

A thick, snow-white rug made from the fur of some unknown beast covered the floors of the great hall of Paradise Manor; surprisingly, it was a full pelt. Many beautiful and captivating women, barefoot and clad in light silk, were unfurling their lithe limbs like blossoming petals, sensual and beguiling as they danced to their hearts' content. The music he heard came from them.

The ladies were spinning seductively like bouquets of roses covered in thorns, blossoming in the deep night. When they spun over to Xie Lian, they playfully teased him with their eyes. If any travelers walking in the night were to accidentally intrude upon this scene, it was hard to say whether they'd be more frightened or enchanted. However, when Xie Lian scanned the main hall, his eyes went straight through those women to the person seated in the back.

At the end of the great hall there was a large divan made of black jade, expansive in size; upon it over a dozen people could lounge. But there was only one man seated there, and it was Hua Cheng. There was a group of gorgeous ghost women dancing before him, but he didn't spare them any looks, only lazily keeping an eye on what was before him.

In front of Hua Cheng was a small golden palace. It roughly resembled a heavenly palace, but on closer inspection, that little structure was built from thin sheets of gold foil stacked upon one another. He was also absentmindedly twirling a piece of gold foil in his hand.

Gold Foil Palace. Xie Lian had played this game often when he was a child; it was no different from village kids stacking rocks to build houses. When he was younger, he disliked separation by nature, and it didn't matter what it was—as long as the objects were placed together, Xie Lian would refuse to separate them. So whatever it was he built, he'd forbid anyone to touch it, and he always wished desperately that he could glue the fragile sheets together so that it'd never collapse. When he was even younger, if he saw his golden palace fall apart, he'd be distressed to the point of refusing food and sleep until the king and queen coaxed him from his shell. The golden palace before him now was grand, made of hundreds of layered foil sheets, and fragile like an egg, as if a gentle breeze could blow it down.

Xie Lian couldn't help but chant mentally: *Don't collapse, don't collapse.*

A brief moment later, however, Hua Cheng gazed at his work and flashed a smile. He extended a finger and flicked the top of the golden palace—

Flitter flatter, the foil fluttered and collapsed into a heap.

Gold foil was now strewn across the ground. The golden palace was destroyed, but Hua Cheng appeared amused by his handiwork, like a child who'd pushed over a tower of building blocks.

He mindlessly threw away the gold foil sheet that was still in his hand and jumped off the divan. The dancing women immediately stopped in their steps and backed off to the sides, silencing their songs. Stepping on the gold foil sheets as he went, Hua Cheng walked toward the entrance.

"Since gege is here, why not come in? We haven't been apart for that long, so don't be a stranger to San Lang."

At this beckoning, Xie Lian let down the beaded curtain. "Earlier in the Gambler's Den, it was San Lang who pretended not to recognize me."

Hua Cheng approached and stopped at Xie Lian's side. "Lang Qianqiu was there too, so if I didn't put on an act, I'd be giving gege trouble."

That was a really sloppy act… Xie Lian thought.

Hua Cheng probably knew that Shi Qingxuan was in the crowd too, so Xie Lian stopped worrying about hiding anything.

"San Lang is knowledgeable as always."

Hua Cheng laughed. "Of course. So, is gege here only to visit me?"

"…"

If Xie Lian had to be honest with himself, had he known Hua Cheng was here, he would've asked for leave so he could pay him a visit. Alas, that was not what happened. Hua Cheng, however, wasn't waiting for a response from Xie Lian at all, and smiled.

"Whether you're here to see me or not, I'm happy either way."

Xie Lian was startled by those words. He hadn't had a chance to respond before the women standing on the sides started giggling. Hua Cheng inclined his head, and they all stopped at once, their heads bowed low. They soon filed out of the hall, leaving only the two of them in this massive chamber.

“Come have a seat here, gege,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian examined him as he followed, smiling. “So, this is your real appearance.”

Hua Cheng paused slightly in his step.

Maybe it was his imagination, but Hua Cheng’s shoulders seemed to stiffen for a flash of a second. The moment didn’t last, and Hua Cheng responded naturally.

“I did say that the next time we met, I would greet you with my real appearance.”

Xie Lian grinned and said earnestly, “Not bad.”

Xie Lian’s tone wasn’t teasing or consoling, the words very simply said. Hua Cheng gave a small smile back, and this time, it was genuinely relaxed. They took a few more steps when Xie Lian suddenly remembered something important he’d wanted to confirm with Hua Cheng. He removed the silver chain from around his neck.

“By the way,” Xie Lian said, “did you leave this?”

Hua Cheng glanced at the ring and smiled. “It’s for you.”

“What is it?” Xie Lian asked.

“Nothing important,” Hua Cheng replied. “Just keep it for fun.”

Although that was what he said, Xie Lian knew that this object must be truly valuable, not something so insignificant.

“Then, thank you, San Lang.”

Seeing Xie Lian put the chain with the ring back around his neck, Hua Cheng’s eye shimmered brightly. Xie Lian looked around him.

“Back at the Gambler’s Den, you said you were going to Paradise Manor. I’d thought it was something like a brothel or the red-light district, but this looks more like an entertainment hall?”

Hua Cheng arched his brows. “Gege, what are you saying? I never go to the red-light district.”

Xie Lian was amazed. “Really?”

“Of course,” Hua Cheng replied. The two approached the black jaded divan and sat down next to each other. Hua Cheng continued, “This is nothing but a place I remodel now and then, a residence of sorts. I hang around here when I’m free. If I’m busy, I leave it be.”

“So it’s your home,” Xie Lian commented.

“Residence,” Hua Cheng corrected. “Not a home.”

“Is there a difference?” Xie Lian asked.

“Of course,” Hua Cheng replied. “A home has family. A place where someone lives alone is not a home.”

Xie Lian felt his heart stirred by this. By that definition, it had been over eight hundred years since he had anything that could be called a “home.” Although Hua Cheng had no trace of loneliness on his face, Xie Lian thought they were perhaps alike.

Hua Cheng continued, “If it’s home, then even a small place like Puqi Shrine is a million times better than my Paradise Manor.”

Xie Lian agreed sincerely with the sentiment and smiled. “I didn’t realize that San Lang was this sentimental. But to compare this to my Puqi Shrine, you’re really pulling my leg here.”

Hua Cheng laughed. “What’s there to be embarrassed about? Truth be told, gege’s Puqi Shrine is small, but it’s so much more comfortable than my Paradise Manor. It’s more like a home.”

“Is that so?” Xie Lian said warmly. “Then if you like it, in the future, come over whenever you want. The doors of Puqi Shrine will always open for you.”

Hua Cheng’s face lit up. “Since gege says so, then I’ll gladly take you up on your offer. Don’t think of me as a nuisance in the future.”

“There’s no way!” Xie Lian said. “By the way, San Lang, I want to ask you for a favor, but I don’t know if you’d have the time?”

“What is it?” Hua Cheng asked. “This is my territory. If you ask, I’ll deliver.”

After some thought, Xie Lian said, “Before, when I was dealing with the case at Mount Yujun, I ran into a boy who might have originated from my kingdom.”

Hua Cheng narrowed his eye but didn’t say a word. Xie Lian continued his description.

“The boy was too scared and fled, and I couldn’t find him for the longest time. But earlier, when I was running around the streets of Ghost City, I discovered that he’d fled here. San Lang, you are the lord of this land. Is there any way you can help me find him? The boy’s face is wrapped in bandages, and he only just ran away from the front steps of Paradise Manor.”

Hua Cheng smiled. “All right, I understand. There’s no need to worry, gege. Just wait.”

Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. “Truly, thank you again.”

“This is nothing,” Hua Cheng said. “But you left Lang Qianqiu just like that?”

Xie Lian thought to himself, *If Lang Qianqiu were here, straightforward and obtuse, who knows what trouble he’d start. It’s probably best that we meet up later.*

Xie Lian replied casually, “His Highness Tai Hua caused you trouble earlier at the Gambler’s Den. Sorry about that.”

That slightly condescending smirk appeared on Hua Cheng’s face again. “What are you saying? Who is he to even count as trouble?”

“The things he broke…” Xie Lian started, and Hua Cheng laughed.

“For gege’s sake, I’ll clear his account. He can go around as he wishes, as long as he doesn’t show his face in front of me.”

Xie Lian was amazed. “You don’t care if there are heavenly officials frolicking about in your territory?” Could Hua Cheng really be that confident?

Hua Cheng smiled.

“Gege might not know this, but while all three realms proclaim Ghost City to be a hell of corruption, a pandemonium, in reality, everyone wants to come to carouse. So many heavenly officials pretend not to care or speak ill of this place, but behind everyone's back, they often come in disguise and conduct unspeakable business. I've seen too much. If they don't stir up trouble, then I don't care, and if they do, then even better, because then I can wipe them out all at once."

"It wasn't that His Highness Tai Hua was trying to cause havoc on purpose. It was just that, after seeing a round of that sort of bets go down, he felt he had to stop it. He acted on impulse," Xie Lian explained.

"That's his lack of experience," Hua Cheng said impassively. "Humans are all the same: when given the choice between gaining ten extra years of life or cutting their enemy's life ten years shorter, they pick the latter without hesitation." He then crossed his arms. "That an idiot like Lang Qianqiu can ascend…the heavens are truly lacking in humanity."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, feeling a little guilty. *You can't say it like that. After all, someone like me…ascended three times…*

After some hesitation, Xie Lian spoke up again. "San Lang, it may be out of line for me, but I still have to say it. That Gambler's Den of yours is incredibly dangerous. Won't it blow up in your face one day?"

A place that allowed the betting of sons and daughters and people's lives, granting wishes for others' sudden death—it was dreadfully sinful. Never mind a little brawl; if one day the bets got out of hand, the Heavenly Realm wouldn't be able to stay on the sidelines. Hua Cheng gave him a look.

"Your Highness, did you ask Lang Qianqiu why he had to jump into that mess?"

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, not quite understanding the intent of the question.

Hua Cheng continued, "I bet he must've told you that if he didn't do it, no one else would."

He was amazingly on the mark, obviously having seen through Lang Qianqiu.

"That's indeed what he said." Xie Lian admitted.

“Then I’m the complete opposite,” Hua Cheng said. “If I don’t control a place like this, then someone else will. I’d rather that person be me.”

Xie Lian knew when to back down, and he nodded. “I understand.”

It seemed, although Hua Cheng was the sentimental sort, he also cared more about control and power than Xie Lian realized.

Hua Cheng continued, “Nonetheless, thank you, gege, for your concern.”

Just then, Xie Lian heard a voice from the door.

“Chengzhu, I’ve brought him.”

Xie Lian looked to the front entrance and saw the Waning Moon Officer from before, bowing just beyond the beaded curtain. In his arms he held none other than the ragged boy in bandages.

Hua Cheng didn’t even turn his head. “Bring him over.”

Thus, the Waning Moon Officer carried the boy inside and put him gently on the ground. Xie Lian couldn’t help but peek at the officer’s wrist again to see whether there really was a cursed shackle, but he bowed and stood down swiftly after delivering the boy. Since there were more important matters at hand, Xie Lian cut in first and soothed the boy.

“Don’t be scared. It was my fault last time; I won’t do it again.”

The boy’s eyes were wide with fear and confusion, but he stayed in place—perhaps because he had run out of energy to escape, or perhaps because he knew he couldn’t get away. He peeked at Xie Lian, then peeked at the lap table on the black jade divan. Xie Lian followed his line of sight and saw he was eyeing a plate of luscious fruit.

The boy must’ve been hiding for too long and had not eaten. Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng, but before he said anything, Hua Cheng answered.

“Go ahead, no need to ask me.”

It wasn’t the time for politeness, so Xie Lian uttered a thanks and reached for the plate of fruit, giving it to the boy. That boy snatched the plate from Xie Lian and started stuffing fruit into his mouth.

It appeared he really was desperately starving. Even when Xie Lian was at his worst, starved like a stray dog, he'd never shoved food into his face like this.

"Slow down," he chided gently. After a pause, he attempted, "What's your name?"

The boy mumbled as he ate, looking as if he was trying to say something but couldn't do so clearly.

"He may not have spoken in many years and has forgotten how," Hua Cheng suggested.

Indeed, it looked like this boy did not speak much, not even to Xiao-Ying, and had likely been like this for a long time. Xie Lian sighed.

"We can do this slowly."

By then, all the fruit on the plate had been devoured like a whirlwind. Seeing that his bandages were soaked with dried blood, covered in black and red spots alike, Xie Lian made a gentle offer after a moment of thought.

"There are wounds on your face, and they seem serious. Let me help take a look."

At the mention of unwrapping his bandages, fear immediately engulfed the boy's eyes. However, after Xie Lian's tireless soothing and encouragement, he once more sat down obediently. Xie Lian retrieved a bottle of medicinal powder from his sleeve, moving slowly as he unraveled the mess of bandages around his head.

As he had suspected, although the boy's face was a mangled mess, all the terrifying little human faces were gone, replaced by large blotches of bright red scars.

The last time they met at Mount Yujun, there were burns covering his face but not as much blood. This boy must've used a knife to cut away the human faces from his own since then, leaving those scars behind.

Xie Lian's hands trembled softly as he rubbed the medicine in. Hua Cheng caught his wrist and said, "Let me."

Xie Lian shook his head and gently pulled his hand free, then said in a low voice, "No. Let me do this myself."

Eight hundred years ago in the Kingdom of Xianle, many who contracted this disease found themselves with no other options and chose this route of self-mutilation. It was hell on earth. Some would miss their target and cut where they shouldn't—and die from blood loss as a result. Some, although successful in removing the terrible lesions, never healed from those wounds.

As Xie Lian wrapped fresh bandages around the boy's head, he realized that his features were actually quite proper: his nose straight and refined, his eyes black and clear. He should've been a handsome young man, but now he bore such a terrifying appearance. He was like many others before him: even if he cut away the distorted human faces, his face would forever be a nightmare, never to recover.

Xie Lian finished wrapping the new bandages before he asked with a shaky voice, "Are you…from Xianle?"

The boy turned to gaze at him with his big eyes. Xie Lian repeated his question, but the boy only shook his head.

Xie Lian then asked, "Then where are you from, exactly?"

The boy answered arduously: "…Yong'an!"

The Human Face Disease had only ever erupted within the Kingdom of Xianle, yet this boy was from the Kingdom of Yong'an!

Xie Lian felt his sight go dark, and he blurted out, "Have you ever met White-Clothed Calamity?"

White-Clothed Calamity. The origin of plagues. The symbol of misfortune.

He was the nightmare of the previous generation of gods, before Crimson Rain Sought Flower was born. If not for Jun Wu, who personally exterminated him, that nightmare would've probably continued even to this day.

That supreme was always dressed in snow-white funeral garb, his expansive sleeves fluttering, and he wore a cry-smiling mask on his face. The mask was called that because the right half of it was smiling and the left half was crying—half joyous, half sad. If he was seen somewhere, it meant that place would soon be doomed to ruin and that chaos would befall the land.

In the last battle before the fall of his kingdom, Xie Lian stood upon the towering city walls of Xianle's imperial capital. His face was covered in grime and tears and written with a lost and bemused expression as he gazed down at his kingdom. In his blurred vision, there stood a white silhouette among the fields of corpses just outside the city walls, his giant white sleeves fluttering, his figure distinct. Xie Lian dropped his head to look down at him, and the white apparition raised his head to look at Xie Lian—and waved directly at him.

That cry-smiling mask was the nightmare Xie Lian couldn't chase away, even after hundreds of years.

The boy didn't seem to know what the "White No-Face" was and only watched Xie Lian with a blank expression. All of a sudden, he let out a loud cry of *"Aah!"*

It turned out that Xie Lian had unconsciously grabbed his shoulder and gripped too hard. It wasn't until the shout that Xie Lian snapped out of it and hurriedly released his grip.

"I'm sorry."

Hua Cheng spoke in a low voice, "You're tired. Go rest."

As soon as he said those words, two dainty girls entered the hall from a small door on the side wall and took the boy away. He frequently looked back at Xie Lian as he was being led off, and Xie Lian comforted him.

"Don't worry. I'll come find you again in a bit."

Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian. "Sit down and relax, and leave him for now. If you have any questions for him, I have my ways of prying open his lips."

"Prying open his lips" sounded rather horrifying, and Xie Lian hurriedly replied, "No, that's all right. If he couldn't say anything, then let it go. We'll take this slow."

Hua Cheng sat down next to Xie Lian. "What are your plans for the boy?"

Xie Lian gave the question some thought. “Keep him with me and bring him along.”

“He’s a ghost, not a human,” Hua Cheng said. “Why don’t you leave him here in Ghost City? I’ll have no trouble feeding another mouth.”

Xie Lian replied earnestly, “San Lang, truly, thank you. But…when I said I would bring him along with me, it’s not just for the purpose of keeping him around.”

Ghost City was indeed Hua Cheng’s territory, and if he was willing to protect the boy, then no one could harm him, nor would he go hungry. However, the most important thing was to actually guide the boy, to help him organize his mind and speech so that he could look and behave normally. Ghost City was a bustling place, but it was chaotic and wild and unsuitable for such counseling. Xie Lian couldn’t think of anyone who would have the patience to undertake this task, besides himself.

Xie Lian replied, “I’m already immensely grateful that you found him for me. I can’t trouble you any more with the aftermath.”

Hua Cheng appeared to disagree but didn’t push further. He said plainly, “It’s really no trouble. While you’re here, just let me know if you need anything, and you’re free to go wherever you want.”

Just then, Xie Lian noticed movement. The scimitar on Hua Cheng’s waist seemed to have gone through a sudden change.

Xie Lian looked down and was instantly amazed. It turned out there was a silver eye crafted on the hilt of that scimitar. The pattern of the eye was formed by a mere few silver strokes, but although simple, it looked vivid enough to be alive. He didn’t notice it at first because the eye was closed in a thin line, but just now, the eye fluttered open and revealed a crimson, gem-like pupil, rattling as it spun once.

Hua Cheng noticed it too and said solemnly, “Gege, I need to leave for a bit. I’ll be right back.”

“An alarm?” Xie Lian asked. Could Lord Wind Master and Qianqiu have shown their true selves here in Ghost City? Xie Lian rose too. “I’ll come with you.”

Hua Cheng gently pushed him back down. “Don’t worry, it’s not His Highness Tai Hua or the other one. Gege, just sit here. There’s no need for you to go.”

Since Hua Cheng made it that clear, Xie Lian couldn’t keep insisting on going along. Hua Cheng turned and left the main hall, waving from the doorway. The beaded curtain parted automatically as he approached, and once he exited, it let itself back down, clacking as it did.

Seated on the black jaded divan, Xie Lian relaxed briefly and thought about the bandaged boy. Remembering the objective of his trip, however, he rose to his feet. He passed through the small door the girls had left from and came to a small garden. The vermilion corridor cutting across the garden was empty of life.

Xie Lian was still wondering which way he should go when suddenly a black shadow flashed by.

That retreating silhouette—it was the Waning Moon Officer.

Xie Lian recalled the cursed shackle on the officer’s wrist; it had been on his mind. He was about to call out to him when the silhouette disappeared. From the way the man moved, it seemed he was wary of being discovered. Thus, Xie Lian soundlessly followed after him.

Making his way to the corner of the building behind which the officer disappeared, Xie Lian clung to the wall and stealthily gazed over. That youth moved swiftly and was constantly on the lookout around him, extremely cautious and indeed afraid to be seen.

Xie Lian wondered, *The Waning Moon Officer should be one of San Lang’s subordinates, so why is he sneaking around inside San Lang’s territory?*

Xie Lian suspected this man could possess ill intent, so he also hid himself and followed. The Waning Moon Officer made a number of turns through the hallways, but Xie Lian held his breath and was always within a dozen steps behind. They rounded a corner and came to a long hallway, and at the end there was a set of large, beautifully decorated doors.

If he turns around now, there won’t be anywhere to hide, Xie Lian thought.

Unexpectedly, just as the thought crossed his mind, the Waning Moon Officer stopped and turned his head.

Xie Lian knew he was in trouble the moment the Officer paused. Hastily, Ruoye flew out and wrapped itself several times around the wooden beam overhead, pulling Xie Lian up to the ceiling where he clung to the beam.

The Waning Moon Officer didn't see anyone behind him and didn't think to look up, so he turned around again and continued on his way.

Nonetheless, Xie Lian still didn't dare to let himself down too soon. He remained pressed against the ceiling as he inched forward silently, thinking that he resembled a gecko as he moved. Good thing the other party didn't go far and stopped before a set of doors. Xie Lian stopped too, to observe.

Before this door was a statue of a woman, wily and beautiful. Of course, from Xie Lian's angle, all he could see clearly was her round head and a shallow, round jaded plate in her hands. The Waning Moon Officer didn't move to open the door first but instead turned to the statue and tossed something into the jaded plate. It made a crisp, clacking sound.

Dice? Xie Lian guessed.

It was a sound he'd heard many times today, and not one he'd forget for a long time. Sure enough, when the masked youth removed his hand and Xie Lian looked, it was indeed two dice in the jaded plate, both revealing six red dots.

The Waning Moon Officer tucked the dice away before opening the door. It was surprisingly unlocked, and when he entered through the doors and closed them behind him, Xie Lian didn't hear any sound of locks or latches either. He waited for a moment before he fluttered down to the ground as quietly as a piece of paper and crossed his arms as he examined the doors.

This room didn't appear to be that big, and whatever the Waning Moon Officer was doing inside should make noise. Yet once he entered, there was not a sound from within. Xie Lian decisively raised a hand and pushed.

Sure enough, when he opened the door, there was not a soul inside. From the looks of it, this was a perfectly normal, if quite luxurious, little room. Everything inside was in order at a glance, and there was no possibility that there was a secret path.

Xie Lian closed the door and looked thoughtfully at the female statue and at the jaded plate in her hands. It seemed that the mechanism lay in that jaded plate and the two dice.

The room was still locked—not with a physical lock but a magic one. A key was required to open this lock, or an authorization incantation. The dice must roll two sixes in that plate for one to see the real destination behind those doors.

But Xie Lian rolling two sixes right then and there was something that would never happen. He could only gaze at the door and sigh. After he paced for a bit in front of the doors, he withdrew and returned from whence he came. After walking for a while, he stopped abruptly. Walking toward him from the other end of the path was a tall, red-clad figure, with a slender and long silver scimitar hung at his waist. It was Hua Cheng.

He walked over with his arms crossed. “Gege, I’ve been looking for you.”

He looked exactly as he did when he left, the only difference being that the scimitar on his waist was out of its scabbard. It, along with the scabbard, clattered against him, clanking as he walked, painting a picture of arrogance. However, that silver eye on the hilt of Eming was closed.

Xie Lian composed himself and said, “I was going to go see the child, but I didn’t realize your house was so big. I got lost.”

At first Xie Lian was going to tell Hua Cheng about what had just happened, but when the words came to his lips, they turned around and he swallowed them.

The reason he had come to Ghost City was to investigate the missing heavenly official. Any signs of suspiciousness must not be ignored. And who knows, maybe the missing official was imprisoned in that room. It’d be best if he could find a way to go through those doors first. If the two matters were unrelated, Xie Lian would report to Hua Cheng about his subordinate’s suspicious actions. But if the two matters *were* related…

Hua Cheng spoke as he led Xie Lian back to the main hall.

“If you want to see that boy, I can send someone to bring him to you. There’s no need for you to seek him out yourself.”

It was probably because Xie Lian had something to hide, but the way he spoke to Hua Cheng unconsciously became more docile.

“Mm…you finished your business so fast?”

“It’s finished,” Hua Cheng replied. “Just another gang of useless trash embarrassing themselves, that’s all.”

The tone in which he said “useless trash” was very familiar, and Xie Lian guessed, “Did Green Ghost Qi Rong come and cause trouble?”

Hua Cheng laughed. “That’s right. Didn’t I tell you that many have their eyes on my place here? Qi Rong has wanted Ghost City for himself for years now, but the most he can ever do is want and burn with envy. So every so often he’ll send some even more useless underlings to cause mischief. Nothing worth mentioning. Don’t worry about it. Actually, I just happen to have a place I want to show gege. Might gege grant me the pleasure?”

“Of course,” Xie Lian replied happily.

Traversing the long corridor, Hua Cheng led Xie Lian to another lofty great hall.

The doors of the hall seemed to be made of steel with violent beasts carved upon them, horrible and terrifying. The moment Hua Cheng approached, the beasts parted and opened the doors. A blast of killing intent assaulted Xie Lian before he even stepped foot into the hall, and he tensed, veins popping on his hands, prepared to face anything.

However, once he saw clearly what was inside the hall, he blinked. His defenses melted away in an instant, and his legs moved on their own, bringing him inside.

Within the great hall, all manner of weapons were hung on all four walls. There were sabers, swords, spears, shields, whips, war hammers… It was an armory!

Any man finding himself in an armory such as this, surrounded by all kinds of weaponry, would feel as if he were in heaven, and his blood would boil with excitement. Xie Lian was no exception; his eyes were wide and his face bright. The last time he had felt such exhilaration was in Jun Wu's armory.

Although his expression remained schooled, he was already so excited he was stammering, "May…may I touch?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "As gege likes."

Xie Lian's hands instantly flew out to feel the various weapons hung on the walls, so absorbed he couldn't tear himself away. "These…all of these are masterpieces! This sword is splendid, a battle of one against many would most definitely bring out its godly powers! This one too! Wait, and that saber…"

Hua Cheng was leaning on the wall near the door, watching Xie Lian's face flush with delight. "Gege, what do you think?"

Xie Lian was examining each piece so intently he was reluctant to turn around. "What do I think, what?"

"Do you like it?" Hua Cheng asked.

"I do!" Xie Lian replied.

"Do you like it a lot?" Hua Cheng asked again.

"Very much!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

Hua Cheng seemed to have snickered, but Xie Lian didn't notice. His heart was busy racing as he unsheathed a cold and shimmering verdant blade at least four feet long, marveling as he did so.

"Has gege found any that he particularly fancies?" Hua Cheng spoke up again.

Xie Lian's entire face was bright and glowing, and he was unable to stop singing praises. "Yes! Yes! All of them!"

"Originally, I was thinking gege didn't have any useful weapons on hand, so if there was anything here you fancied you could just take it for yourself," Hua Cheng said. "But since gege likes them all, I'll give them all to you."

"No, no, no, there's no need," Xie Lian quickly said. "I have no use for weapons anyway."

“Really?” Hua Cheng said. “But I clearly see that gege loves swords?”

“Liking them doesn’t mean I have to own them,” Xie Lian said. “I haven’t used one in years. Just looking makes me happy. Besides, I’d have nowhere to put them if you gave them all to me.”

“That’s easy to solve,” Hua Cheng replied. “I’ll give this entire armory to you.”

Xie Lian took that as a joke and grinned. “There’s no way I could take away a room this big.”

“No need to take it away,” Hua Cheng said. “I’ll give you the property too. Just come visit when you’re free.”

“No, it’s okay,” Xie Lian said. “An armory requires constant maintenance. I’d hate to neglect the weapons.”

Xie Lian placed the sword carefully back onto its holder and said nostalgically, “Once upon a time, I owned an armory like this too, but it was burned down. All of these weapons are precious devices to be desired; you have to cherish them, San Lang.”

“That’s easy too,” Hua Cheng said. “If I’m free, I can help gege maintain the armory.”

Xie Lian laughed. “Well, I certainly don’t have the guts to ask My Lord the Ghost King to do chores for me.”

All of a sudden, Jun Wu’s warning right before he left for this mission echoed in Xie Lian’s mind: *“The scimitar Eming is a cursed blade, a blade of misfortune. To forge such an evil weapon would require terrifyingly cruel sacrifice and bloody determination. Do not touch it, and do not let it touch you either. If you do, the consequences will be unimaginable.”*

Xie Lian contemplated but still decided to ask in the end. “But San Lang, none of these weapons are a match against your scimitar Eming, right?”

Hua Cheng cocked his left brow. “Oh? Has gege heard of my scimitar too?”

“I’ve heard some rumors,” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng snickered. “I bet they weren’t nice rumors. Did someone tell you that my scimitar was forged by an evil, bloody ritual? That I sacrificed living humans?”

Sharp as always. Xie Lian responded, “Nothing too horrible. Everyone has negative gossip said about them, but not everyone would believe it. But perhaps I might have the honor of seeing the legendary scimitar Eming?”

“You’ve actually already seen it, gege,” Hua Cheng said.

He took a few steps closer to Xie Lian and said softly, “Look, gege, this is Eming.”

The eye upon the scimitar that hung at his waist rattled as it swiveled in Xie Lian’s direction. It might’ve been Xie Lian’s imagination, but he thought that silver eye was subtly squinting into a crescent.

Chapter 16:
Borrowing Luck, Night Crawl in Paradise Manor

AND SO XIE LIAN bent at the waist and greeted it. “Hello there.”

Hearing the greeting, that eye squinted harder, turning itself into a full crescent, like it was smiling. The large eye spun left and right, extremely lively, as if it wasn’t just a pattern carved onto a scimitar hilt but the real, living eye of a human.

Hua Cheng’s lips curled upwards. “Gege, it likes you.”

Xie Lian raised his head. “Really?”

Hua Cheng raised his brow. “Really. It’s too lazy to spare a single glance at those it doesn’t like. In fact, there are very few that Eming actually likes.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian smiled at Eming. “Thank you, then.” He turned to Hua Cheng. “I rather like it too.”

At his words, the eye blinked madly, and the scimitar started shaking all of a sudden from where it hung at Hua Cheng’s waist. He reprimanded it, “No.”

“‘No,’ what?” Xie Lian asked.

“No,” Hua Cheng reiterated.

Eming shook again, looking desperate to jump out of its scabbard.

Xie Lian asked curiously, “Are you telling it ‘no’?”

“Yes,” Hua Cheng deadpanned. “It wants you to pet it, but I’m telling it no.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Well, why not?”

He reached out. Eming’s eye instantly widened, like it was looking at him with great anticipation. *I can’t pet here, poking the eye will hurt*, Xie Lian thought, then lowered his hand and stroked lightly along the curve of the hilt. The eye squinted into a full crescent line and quivered even harder, as if it was extremely pleased and enjoying the touch very much.

The more Xie Lian stroked the scimitar, the more intriguing he found it. He was the type of person animals liked; when he'd pet furry dogs and cats, they'd squint their eyes like this when they got comfortable and would often throw themselves into his embrace, whining and mewling. Who knew that he'd be stroking a cold, silver scimitar—that legendary cursed blade, no less—like he would a puppy! In what way was this a "bloody, cursed blade of misfortune"?

Xie Lian hadn't believed it before, but after seeing this with his own eyes, he threw away all that awful hearsay entirely, tossing it into the trash pile labeled "not believable." An evil, bloody ritual wouldn't forge a spirit this clever and cute.

***

The two spent a considerable amount of time discussing and critiquing various famous swords and legendary blades in detail, and Xie Lian exited the armory in high spirits after; even grabbing hold of Hua Cheng's hands on the return to Paradise Hall.

The boy had also been brought in after being washed up and dressed in clean bandages. Although his face was still wholly covered, he looked new and refreshed. He was a person of slender frame and delicate build, and should have been a seedling with infinite possibilities—but the version of him here right now was one of hunched shoulders and slumped figure, a cowering form who couldn't meet anyone's eyes, a pitiful soul.

Xie Lian pulled the boy to sit. "With her last words, Miss Xiao-Ying asked me to take care of you, and I agreed to it. But nevertheless, I still have to ask what you want to do. Would you be interested in following me in cultivation from now on?"

The boy stared at him blankly, as if afraid to believe the words he was hearing—that someone was actually willing to take him in and teach him. He looked hesitant and hopeful.

Xie Lian continued, "I can't say the conditions at my place are good, but I can still promise you won't need to hide any longer. You won't need to steal food, and you won’t be beaten.”

As he spoke, Xie Lian didn’t notice that next to him, Hua Cheng’s eye was narrowed. He was watching the boy with a cold, judging look.

Xie Lian continued warmly, “If you can’t remember your own name, then why don’t we come up with a new one?”

The boy pondered for a moment and said, “Ying.”

Xie Lian supposed that the name was to commemorate Miss Xiao-Ying, since both names used the character for “firefly.” He nodded. “Good. That’s a good name. You’re from the Kingdom of Yong’an, and Yong’an’s national surname is Lang, so why don’t you use that as your new name and call yourself Lang Ying?”

The boy finally nodded, hesitantly. Xie Lian understood it as the boy accepting the offer to follow him.

The banquet began. It was a “small” feast that Hua Cheng had prepared for Xie Lian, but by its setup and size, it could very well host over a dozen. Innumerous women carried jaded plates in their hands, and upon the plates were various delicacies: fine wines, fresh fruits, and small refreshments. Their offerings were endless, and their steps were dainty and light as they walked along the sides of the main hall in a line, each presenting their jaded plate as they approached the black jaded divan. Lang Ying watched but didn’t dare to reach out, and it wasn’t until Xie Lian pushed some of the plates toward him that he slowly grabbed a few items to eat.

Watching him, another scene flashed in Xie Lian’s mind. It was of another boy whose face was wrapped in bandages, dirty and unkempt; he was kneeling on the floor hugging a plate of offerings, his head bowed low as he stuffed his face.

Just then, a sashaying lady in purple silk approached, offering a carafe of wine. Hua Cheng reached out and poured for Xie Lian.

“Gege, have a cup?”

Xie Lian’s mind was occupied and he wasn’t paying attention, so he carelessly accepted the cup, delivering it directly to his lips. He didn’t realize it was wine until the drink entered his mouth, then his eyes refocused once more. His gaze just happened to land on what—or rather, who—was behind Hua Cheng. The lady who offered the wine looked back and winked at him.

Xie Lian sputtered on the spot: *“Pffff-ffttt!”*

Good thing he’d already swallowed that sip of wine and nothing came splattering out of his mouth. He only choked, coughing nonstop. Lang Ying took fright and almost dropped the cake in his hand.

Xie Lian soothed as he coughed, “It’s nothing, it’s nothing.”

Hua Cheng gently patted his back. “What’s wrong? Is the wine not to your liking?”

Xie Lian quickly explained himself. “Oh, no! It’s very good. I just suddenly remembered that my cultivation method forbids alcohol.”

“Oh?” Hua Cheng said. “Then this is my fault for being inconsiderate and making gege break his vow.”

“It’s not your fault,” Xie Lian said. “I’d just forgotten.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, turned around, and stealthily glimpsed toward the center of the main hall.

The lady who’d offered wine had her back to him as she sashayed off toward the doors, her figure sensual and seductive, charming and graceful. Hua Cheng only paid attention to what was at hand or focused entirely on Xie Lian, so he spared no attention for those beautiful women. Therefore, he naturally paid no mind to their faces. However, the face Xie Lian had seen just now was clear and recognizable.

That sweet, seductive lady who had offered him wine was none other than the Wind Master Qingxuan!

In order to sneak into Paradise Manor, the Lord Wind Master hadn’t hesitated to transform into a woman… That wink gave Xie Lian quite the shock, and he thought, *You’d better give me more wine to swallow this down.*

Unaware, Hua Cheng said conversationally, “I always thought cultivation was meant simply for living a carefree, pleasurable life. If you must forbid this or that, then what’s the point? What do you think?”

Xie Lian steadied himself swiftly and casually said back, “That depends on the path you choose. Some sects don’t mind earthly pleasures, but my chosen path of cultivation has always forbidden drinking and licentious acts. Alcohol can be overlooked once in a while, but abstinence from the latter is absolute.”

When he said the word “abstinence,” Hua Cheng cocked his right brow, displaying an unreadable expression that could be either displeasure or annoyance.

Xie Lian continued, “Actually, it also forbids hatred. A gambling hall involves extreme joy and anguish and can easily produce hatred, so it is a place best avoided. But if one can maintain control of one’s mind, unmoved by wins and losses, then there is no need to wholly avoid gambling.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng laughed out loud. “No wonder gege was still interested in playing at the Gambler’s Den.”

Going around in circles, Xie Lian had finally brought the subject of the conversation naturally to gambling and said, “Speaking of which, San Lang, your gambling techniques are amazing to behold.”

“I’m just lucky, that’s all,” Hua Cheng said.

“…”

Comparing that to his own luck, Xie Lian felt rather woeful. “I really am curious—and don’t tease me, San Lang—but is there really a technique to rolling dice?”

If there wasn’t, then Hua Cheng couldn’t just will the numbers he wanted back at the Gambler’s Den, and that Waning Moon Officer couldn’t have so easily rolled two sixes.

Hua Cheng only smiled. “Why would I dare tease gege? Of course there is a secret technique, but it’s not something that’s learned in a day, and not everyone who’s learned the technique can master it.”

Xie Lian had more or less expected that answer. Hua Cheng added, “However, I can tell you of a faster way. I promise gege will be able to succeed as he wishes and win every round.”

“What way?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng raised his right hand, the very same right hand that had the red string tied on the third finger. The red string was tied into a small bow on the back of that hand, bright and vivid. He beckoned Xie Lian.

“Give me your hand.”

Xie Lian didn’t know what it was for, but since Hua Cheng asked for his hand, he gave it to him. Hua Cheng’s hand had no warmth of life, but it was not freezing. He squeezed Xie Lian’s hand and held it for a bit, then smiled before turning it over and tossing two dice into his palm.

“Try it now.”

Xie Lian chanted mentally for sixes and rolled the dice. As they clattered to a stop, the dice indeed revealed two red sixes.

“What trick is this?” Xie Lian was amazed.

“No trick,” Hua Cheng replied. “I’ve simply lent gege a bit of luck.”

“So luck can be borrowed like spiritual power?” Xie Lian said in wonder.

Hua Cheng laughed. “Of course. Next time, if gege is going to make bets with anyone, come see me first. I’ll lend you as much luck as you want. I promise your opponent will suffer a loss so great he won’t make a comeback for a hundred years.”

The two played for a few dozen more rounds, and Xie Lian confirmed for himself that it was indeed so, before he stopped to say he was tired. Hua Cheng ordered for Lang Ying to be settled before personally escorting Xie Lian to the guest chamber.

Watching as that red silhouette slowly disappeared down the hall, Xie Lian closed the door, sat by the table, and used a hand to cover his forehead, bending as he supported his mind’s weight. The more thoughtful Hua Cheng was, the more guilty Xie Lian felt.

There is really nothing to criticize about the way San Lang treats me. Hopefully this case has nothing to do with him, and once the truth comes out, I’ll explain everything and apologize, Xie Lian thought.

He had only sat for a moment when he heard someone calling him from outside the door with a small voice.

"Your Highness… Your Highness… Your Highness the Crown Prince…"

Recognizing the voice, Xie Lian immediately rose to open the door, and the person waiting just outside leapt in. It was indeed Shi Qingxuan in her female form.

She was still dressed in that ghost lady getup: a dress of diaphanous silk, with her waist wrapped tight to a dainty width. The moment she leapt in, she rolled onto the ground in a heap and transformed back to a man, hand to his chest.

"I can't breathe! I CAN'T BREATHE! My god, I'm going to be choked to death by this thing!"

Xie Lian closed the door behind him, and when he looked back, what he saw was a full-grown man in a wicked purple silk dress, lying on the ground and wildly ripping at his chest and waist bindings. Xie Lian couldn't look and covered his eyes.

"Lord Wind Master…Lord Wind Master! Can't you just change back to your Daoist robes?"

"Am I stupid?" Shi Qingxuan replied. "Walking around in the dark night in a conspicuous white robe, I'd be a target!"

But…in your current getup, on some level, you're more of a target… Xie Lian thought.

Xie Lian crouched down next to him. "Lord Wind Master, how did you sneak in? Didn't we agree to meet in three days?"

"Well, what was I to do?" Shi Qingxuan replied. "I asked around on the streets, and they all said Your Highness was sent to the Paradise Manor, and isn't Paradise Manor the Ghost King's lair? Even the name of the place sounded bad. I watched from afar and decided it was definitely an obscene and wanton place, so I was worried about you and expended tremendous effort to sneak in. What an unlucky journey this has been! Either I get dragged to facials by women and girls, or I have to swallow my honor to dress like this. I have never, *ever* made sacrifices this huge."

But you're obviously enjoying yourself… Xie Lian thought. "Where's His Highness Tai Hua? I hope he doesn't start anything else, with my lord having left him out there.”

Shi Qingxuan finally ripped through all the bindings, gathering breath at last, and sprawled across the ground like a puddle. “Don’t worry. I pulled rank and commanded him to not move a muscle, so there shouldn’t be any more issues. But seriously, Your Highness, you’re so lucky!”

“Huh?” Xie Lian gaped. “Me? Lucky?”

“Yeah!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “Look how miserable Lang Qianqiu and I have been in Ghost City. We either get hung up with the threat of having our pants pulled down, or we wander the streets like stray dogs without a place willing to take us in. And here you are, eating well, drinking well, and there’s even a Ghost King keeping you company!”

…When he put it that way, it was indeed rather tragic. Shi Qingxuan finally pulled himself up from the floor.

“So, Your Highness, do you still remember our objective for coming to Ghost City?”

Xie Lian regained his composure and replied, “Of course I remember. Back at the Paradise Hall, I was preparing for our mission.”

Shi Qingxuan looked at him in confusion. “Really? What exactly did you prepare at the Paradise Hall? I only remember you playing around with Crimson Rain Sought Flower rolling dice. You guys weren’t even playing properly; you were feeling up his hands, and he was feeling up yours. What kind of new method was that?”

“…” Xie Lian explained himself, “Lord Wind Master, please don’t make it sound so questionable. We were only having a discussion. I’ve found some clues here in Paradise Manor and was investigating. To keep going, I needed a little luck.”

Xie Lian raised his right hand and curled it into a tight fist as if he had grabbed hold of something, his face set. “And I’ve gotten it.”

The two silently slunk out the door. After two incense time, they successfully found that room once more.

Xie Lian approached the statue of the woman and took out the two dice given to him before. He paused and took a deep breath before rolling the dice. There was a soft rattle, and sure enough, the roll was two red sixes.

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief, but he felt worse when he remembered that this luck was lent to him earlier at the Paradise Hall by Hua Cheng. Seeing his remorseful expression, Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulders.

“Since we’ve come this far, just let it go. If I were you, I would’ve declined this mission from Jun Wu no matter how he begged, lest I be a poor friend.”

Xie Lian shook his head. At the end of the day, Shi Qingxuan didn’t know Jun Wu very well. This case was certainly awkward for Xie Lian, and Jun Wu had known it would be. From his understanding of Jun Wu’s character, under normal circumstances he would never have brought this up with him and would’ve appointed another heavenly official to the mission. But even knowing this would be awkward for Xie Lian, Jun Wu still requested his assistance. That could only mean one thing: Jun Wu had no one else who was better suited to take on this mission and only asked him out of necessity. If that was the case, Xie Lian had no choice.

Besides, the missing heavenly official set off the distress signal seven days ago, and Hua Cheng had left seven days ago. That was a coincidence he couldn’t ignore.

Xie Lian heaved a sigh before taking back the dice and pushing open the door. Behind it was no longer the small, simple chamber he’d seen before but a dark tunnel with a long stairway stretching into the abyss below, with brisk winds whistling at them from the blackness.

Xie Lian traded looks with Shi Qingxuan and nodded. One behind the other, the two entered the tunnel and the darkness beyond. Shi Qingxuan took the lead; he snapped his fingers and ignited a palm torch, illuminating the steps under their feet. Xie Lian closed the door gently and brought up the rear.

As they descended, Xie Lian asked of Shi Qingxuan, “Lord Wind Master, were there any heavenly officials banished from the heavenly court in recent years? I mean, besides me.”

“There were,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I saw a cursed shackle on the wrist of that Waning Moon Officer from Ghost City. That could only come from the heavens, no?”

Shi Qingxuan was astonished. “What? Cursed shackle? Then Crimson Rain Sought Flower is using a former heavenly official as his subordinate?! What arrogance!!”

“It can’t be arrogance,” Xie Lian responded. “If one no longer belongs to the heavens, then it’s their choice where they go. Originally, there was no need to question his motives, but that ghost officer’s been acting suspiciously. It’s worrisome, so I wanted to see what Lord Wind Master’s thoughts are on his identity.”

Shi Qingxuan pondered briefly and said, “There was indeed a Martial God of the West who was banished a few years back, and it caused quite the stir at the time.”

Martial God of the West? Wasn’t that Quan Yizhen?

Shi Qingxuan continued, “But I don’t think That Highness would descend to the Ghost Realm to be a ghost officer! He came from an orthodox background, and his character wasn’t frivolous.”

If that was the case, then why was he banished? Xie Lian was about to continue his inquiry when the two came to flat ground after sixty or so stone steps.

Before them there was a path about five or six people wide, leading in only one direction, shrouded in darkness. Behind them was the staircase that led to the surface. On either side were thick, solid walls. There wasn’t any need to debate where to go: just go forward.

But after walking along that path for only two hundred steps, a frigid stone wall loomed before them, blocking their path.

Shi Qingxuan frowned. “The path’s cut off? No way.”

He held the palm torch in one hand and used the other to feel around the stone wall, searching for any sign of a release mechanism. He then cast a few spells for clearing illusions to no avail; the wall remained immovable. There was no more he could do.

“Maybe I’ll just punch a hole through it?”

“That would cause way too much commotion,” Xie Lian said. “All of Paradise Manor would be alerted.”

Shi Qingxuan placed his hand flat on the stone wall and gave a short blast of spiritual energy, but he dropped his hand after a moment. “Punching it would be useless. This wall is probably over thirty meters thick.”

But Xie Lian had clearly seen with his own eyes that the Waning Moon Officer had entered here. It was silly to think he’d sneak around just to meditate and reflect in a dead-end tunnel. There had to be some sort of mechanism involved, so the two scrutinized their surroundings in greater detail.

Soon, Xie Lian pointed. “Lord Wind Master, take a look at the ground. There seems to be something.”

Shi Qingxuan dropped his palm immediately, and the two squatted around the spot Xie Lian had pointed out.

The ground of this tunnel was paved with numerous square bricks, each one about the size of a small door. The brick that they were standing on, right in front of the stone wall, had a drawing upon it. It wasn’t a large picture, but it depicted a little person throwing dice.

Shi Qingxuan looked up. “So does this mean it’s the same method as before—that we have to roll the right number to open this stone wall?”

Xie Lian nodded. “That appears to be the case, but I didn’t come in here with that Waning Moon Officer, so I don’t know what the correct roll is.”

“We’ve come this far,” Shi Qingxuan said. “It’s not realistic to turn back just to find that out. Let’s roll a random number and see.”

Xie Lian agreed. “Lord Wind Master, why don’t you give it a go? I… don’t know how long my borrowed luck will last.”

Shi Qingxuan didn’t refuse. He picked up the dice and tossed them to the floor.

“How about that?”

He rolled a two and a five. They waited briefly, but the stone wall didn’t move. Xie Lian picked up the dice.

“That didn’t work as expected.”

Shi Qingxuan suddenly cried, “Your Highness, look under our feet! The image has changed!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian immediately looked down. Sure enough, the image on the square brick beneath their feet had been a little person rolling dice, but as they watched, the colors slowly faded and filled in once more, transforming into a different scene. It looked like a long, fat, thick, black creepy crawler.

“What in the world is that?” Shi Qingxuan wondered.

“An earthworm? A leech?” Xie Lian guessed. “That’s what it looks like. There are plenty of them in the paddy fields, so I’ve seen a lot.”

Shi Qingxuan wondered some more. “What on earth were you doing that you saw a lot of these things…”

Before his words were finished, he vanished.

It wasn’t just him—Xie Lian himself disappeared as well. Just as the words “were you doing” were uttered, they both felt the ground give way beneath their feet. The next moment, they were free-falling into another tunnel.

Turned out, that stone wall wasn’t a door after all, it was literally a stone wall. The square brick beneath their feet was the real door. After tossing the dice, the door opened abruptly and closed instantly. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan fell for only a moment before crashing heavily to the ground.

Thankfully, the ground was soft, otherwise the two would’ve cratered in deep. They didn’t suffer any pain from such a tumble and were just pulling themselves up when their heads knocked into each other, and they both gave a cry of *“Aah!”* at the collision. Xie Lian, with one hand covering his head, felt around above with his other hand but only made contact with the same soft, wet, muddy earth as the ground they were on.

There were no stone tiles. That stone door was long gone.

When they fell, the palm torch Shi Qingxuan ignited had been extinguished. Now that he had relit it and brightened their surroundings, the two discovered that they were in a mud tunnel.

The tunnel was round with muddy walls and didn't appear to be man-made. Shi Qingxuan rubbed his forehead.

"What is this place? Did we get thrown here because we rolled the wrong number?"

Xie Lian pondered briefly and replied, "It's very possible. That stone door is already gone, meaning we have no way to turn back. Let's think of a way to escape first."

The two talked it over and decided to keep following the tunnel path. The tunnel had numerous twists and turns, and if a full-grown adult wanted to stand up straight in it, they'd have a bit of a hard time. They could only walk by bending at the waist, or crawl, making their movements both slow and tiresome. The air in this tunnel was warm and moist, the mud clingy and annoying; each of their steps sank and dragged, watery and gross. Sometimes, they would even step in the rotten remains of plants or animals. Xie Lian's face never changed, but Shi Qingxuan had goosebumps popping up all over. But the longer they traveled, the more Xie Lian felt something was off.

"Lord Wind Master, we'd better move faster. This place…"

Just then, a loud, bizarre rumbling sound reverberated around them.

The noise crashed in, the entire tunnel shook, and small blots of mud pitter-pattered down from the tremors. The two exchanged a look, and without a word, they sped off in the opposite direction of the noise.

Yet that enormous sound and the massive tremors were thundering their way, going faster than them, pushing closer by the second. The two of them moved arduously, one step shallow and the next step deep, scrambling through the twisting tunnel without an end in sight, not even a ray of light. And not just that, but the direction they were running toward also reverberated with those same thunderous tremors!

They were blocked both front and behind, and the two had to stop. Along with the rumbling, the sound of a massive, heavy body hurtling through the mud whammed past.

Two humongous earthworms wiggled in and appeared before Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan.

The two worms were swollen and large, their bodies a bruised purple, their skins slightly translucent. The bodies of these worms were segmented with no heads or tails—the two heads were nothing more than meat stumps. What else could they be if not incredibly large worms?

That stone door had opened and dropped them into these earthworm monsters' nest!

Xie Lian raised an arm to guard himself, Ruoye at the ready, while Shi Qingxuan drew out his Wind Master fan from out of nowhere. Unfortunately, in this narrow tunnel, it was impossible to start any gusts, and any crazed winds would only recoil back at them, making that spiritual device difficult to use. In that moment, Xie Lian remembered that worms were afraid of light and heat, and he shouted a command.

"Lord Wind Master, please lend me some spiritual power! And intensify the palm torch!"

Shi Qingxuan followed his directions and clapped Xie Lian's hand with his own left hand while the flames in his right palm burst dozens of centimeters higher. Xie Lian also swiftly started a bright palm torch. Sure enough, the two giant worms felt the heat and shrunk back, pulling a few meters away. Using the flames, the pair continued slowly on their path, forcing the giant earthworms to keep their distance and praying for an exit.

But the tunnel was narrow, and with such large flames burning, soon enough it wasn't only the worms feeling the heat. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan themselves were sweating profusely as if they were baking in an oven, miserable and wretched. And the more horrifying thing was that Shi Qingxuan couldn't keep burning through his power to keep the flames alive, and the fires grew smaller and smaller. They also noticed that although the giant earthworms were still evading them, they weren't as fearful.

After a few more steps, Xie Lian could feel his breathing grow difficult. He said, "Lord Wind Master, the palm torch won't last. The mud here may be moist and loose, but we're still deep underground. Soon we'll run out of air, the fire will die, and we're going to faint."

Shi Qingxuan gritted his teeth. "Then we can only use the Teleportation Array."

Although neither of the two had a free hand to draw an array and the current environment wasn't exactly ideal, there was no other way.

"Let me find somewhere flat," Xie Lian said.

Just then, he felt a small plate beneath his steps—not moist and spongy, but more like a stone tile. A thought struck Xie Lian, and he immediately crouched down to check. Just as he suspected—it was another stone door!

It also had an image of a little person rolling dice on it. Shi Qingxuan stepped onto the tile with him, overjoyed.

"Quick, quick, quick! Roll the dice and open it!"

Xie Lian was just about to roll the dice when he suddenly thought, *But what if I roll a worse outcome and open an even more horrifying place?*

Xie Lian passed the dice to Shi Qingxuan. "You do it!"

Without a word, Shi Qingxuan grabbed the dice and tossed. *Rattle, rattle.* This time it was a three and a four. Xie Lian picked up the dice readily, and the two stood together on top of the door tile. The palm torch in Shi Qingxuan's hand shrank by another inch; the two giant worms were squirming and ready to approach. Xie Lian stared intently at the drawing on the tile as it slowly dissolved then gradually transformed into another picture. It was a forest, with a number of oddly dressed little people dancing in circles around another figure in the center.

Just then, one of the worms finally stopped holding back—it charged toward them with its mouth open a slit, dragging its heavy body.

Thankfully, when the worm was only a mere meter away from them, the stone door opened!

This time, the two fell into another narrow hole, except the ground was hard and dry, and this new space was extremely cramped. This fall was painful, and the two tumbled and knocked into each other. Xie Lian was used to enduring pain, so he didn't make a sound, but Shi Qingxuan cried out. That left Xie Lian's ears in pain, instead, from the screaming.

Worried something might have happened to him, he called out, "Lord Wind Master, are you okay?"

Shi Qingxuan's head was at the bottom, and his legs were in the air. "I don't know if I'm okay. I've never fallen like this before. Your Highness, working with you is really too thrilling."

Xie Lian couldn't help but let out a small laugh at that as he finally realized that the two of them had fallen into a hole in a tree. He crawled out of the hole with great difficulty and extended a helping hand to Shi Qingxuan.

"Thanks for all your hard work."

"You're welcome," Shi Qingxuan replied.

He pulled on Xie Lian's hand and climbed out of the hole, dirty and disheveled, his silk dress in tatters. When he got out, he put a hand over his brow to block out the stinging brightness of the sun.

"Where's this?"

"As you can see, it's a forest in the deep mountains," Xie Lian replied. He looked around and said, "I think the stone doors are a spiritual device with the same function as the Teleportation Array. Different rolls on the dice will take us to different places. I wonder if we rolled any of the right numbers."

Shi Qingxuan crossed his now-bare arms and contemplated seriously. "Using the Teleportation Array just once requires an immense amount of spiritual power. That Crimson Rain Sought Flower created something like these stone doors just to prevent people from snooping around… It speaks volumes about his immense spiritual powers and how deeply calculating he is."

Although he appeared solemn, his unkempt appearance with bare arms and bare feet made it really difficult for him to come across as serious. Instead, he looked, well, *hilarious*. Xie Lian held back his laughter with immense difficulty as he thought of the way Hua Cheng always lightly curled his lips and shook his head.

Rather than calculating, it's more that he's…mischievous, Xie Lian thought.

The two had only just emerged from the hole in the tree, and not a few steps after did a bunch of naked people suddenly jump out from the nearby bushes and surround them. They started jumping, howling as they did so.

“OOOOOOOOOOH!!”

“…”

The two were deeply shaken, and Shi Qingxuan cried, “What’s this now?!”

Xie Lian raised his hand. “Don’t panic, don’t panic! Let’s take a look first.”

He studied them and realized they weren’t actually naked; they were wearing animal skins and leaves and looked like they were ready to drink blood. They were holding long spears made of branches with sharp stones fastened at the ends as spearheads, and when they smiled at the pair, their teeth were jagged and sharp like saws.

The pair bolted without a word.

Shi Qingxuan shouted as he ran, “My brother used to tell me about this—that deep in the southern mountains, there are many fierce spirits that feast on human flesh! He told me never to come to such a place on my own! Is that what we ran into?!”

Xie Lian was practiced in the art of escape, so his demeanor and manner were far more relaxed than Shi Qingxuan’s. He replied calmly, “Mm, that’s very possible. Either way, we need to find the exit. Let’s see if there are any more stone doors nearby!”

The fearsome spirits ran after them, screaming and howling tirelessly. At first, Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan could only run for it, not fight back. Heavenly laws dictated that, should gods descend to the Mortal Realm, they should never presumptuously use their powers to oppress mortals. This law was to prevent heavenly officials from bullying mortals and creating disasters born of the abuse of their power. But these spirits kept hurling sharp rocks and branches at them, and without warning, one such branch scraped Shi Qingxuan’s cheek.

Now this was absolutely unacceptable. Shi Qingxuan felt his face and found the faintest bloody scratch. He saw red. With a roar, he came to a sudden stop. He spun around and shouted, “You ignorant, violent hillbillies!

Not only did you not bow before me, the Lord Wind Master, you dared to ruin my face!! Unbelievable!!”

He pulled out his Wind Master fan, flashing it open with a powerful whoosh, and swung with force—their attackers were instantly blown off the ground and sent flying meters away, crashing into nearby trees and howling as they hung off the branches. The two could finally stop running, and they took in deep breaths trying to calm their heartbeats. As they panted, that thought came to Xie Lian again: *It’s such a hassle being a heavenly official… Gods, humans, ghosts, no one has it any easier…*

Shi Qingxuan heaved out his grievances as he turned to Xie Lian. “Your Highness, you saw it, right? They were asking for it! I wasn’t using my powers to bully them.”

“That’s right, I saw it,” Xie Lian said.

Shi Qingxuan felt his face again and mumbled under his breath, “Even my brother wouldn’t dare…” He turned around again. “Let’s go find that stone door.”

Xie Lian nodded silently and watched Shi Qingxuan fix his clothes and hair until he looked properly dashing once more. Unfortunately, he was still dressed in a bedraggled purple silk dress, so it was a dash of peculiar flavor.

It was a truly unforgettable sight. Xie Lian couldn’t help but marvel.

Thinking back on when they first met at Banyue Pass, the Lord Wind Master had seemed like such a bright and scintillating figure, and Xie Lian had thought him a powerful being with immeasurable depth—if not a peerless demonic cultivator, then a supreme master. Now that they were better acquainted, he realized all of that was but an illusion…

The two walked relentlessly in circles through the forest and finally found a set of stone doors beside a different tree hole. This time, Shi Qingxuan refused to roll the dice and shook his head.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but even though my luck isn’t always the best, it’s not always the worst either. Fortune doesn’t seem to be with me today; I rolled twice, and the first time was that earthworm tunnel, the second time a bloodthirsty spirit playground. Who knows what’s next.”

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly and guiltily replied, “Maybe it’s because I’m with you. I must’ve brought your luck down with me.”

“What are you saying?!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “It’s impossible for anyone to bring down my luck—me, the Lord Wind Master! But why don’t you give it a go? Maybe there’s still some of that luck you borrowed from your San Lang left.”

For some reason, Xie Lian felt a little embarrassed when he heard “your San Lang.” He wanted to explain, but at the same time, what was there to explain? If he tried, it would only be weirder, so he didn’t say anything in the end. He felt the dice in his hands and rolled them lightly.

Two sixes.

Xie Lian held his breath as he watched the images on the stone door transform and mentally prepared himself to face whatever came next. But this time, the picture didn’t change, and the stone door creaked open.

Behind the door was another long stairway that descended into darkness, and brisk air whirled up from the depths.

The two exchanged a look, both thinking, *After all that, did we circle back to the beginning?*

Even if they were back at the beginning, that was still better than these strange perils; they’d had enough. Thus, the pair resolutely stepped in. But the moment they entered, the door closed behind them, and when they reached out to push, they only felt the smooth surface of a stone wall.

“Looks like our only path is down,” Xie Lian said.

“Ugh, all right,” Shi Qingxuan sighed. “Let me take a breather, and we’ll continue to play that despicable Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s game!”

The two once again descended through the long, rectangular, stony path. After two hundred steps or so, Xie Lian realized something.

“Good news, Lord Wind Master. This isn’t the same path we took the first time, even though they appear similar.”

Shi Qingxuan noticed it too. “You’re right. The first time we reached the stone wall after some two hundred steps, but not this time.”

Xie Lian said softly, “Looks like we’re on the right path this time.”

As soon as he spoke, they came to a stop.

Ahead of them in the darkness wafted the stench of blood. And accompanying that smell was the heavy breathing of a man.

The two didn’t move a muscle and said nothing. There was neither light, nor flames, yet the other party had already sensed their presence. Right after they stopped, a cold voice rang out.

“I have nothing to say,” spoke the deep voice of a man.

At the sound of that voice, Shi Qingxuan immediately ignited a palm torch.

Chapter 17:
Paradise to Ashes, the Second Coming of Fangxin

XIE LIAN DIDN'T EXPECT Shi Qingxuan to suddenly light a fire, and he didn't even have time to stop him before it was too late. The flames were exceedingly bright and revealed the silhouette of a black-clad man.

The man in black had his head hung low against the stone wall at the end of the path. His face was white as a sheet, his black hair a mess, but underneath that unkempt appearance was an expression that shone with determination and a gaze like burning ice. Although he sat cross-legged without a trace of discomfort, the stench of blood was thick in the air. He was clearly gravely wounded and was obviously imprisoned here. His "I have nothing to say" was probably him mistaking them for interrogators.

Shi Qingxuan saw his face and cried, "It's you!"

That man didn't seem to expect guests and was taken aback—he looked as though he wanted to say "it's you!" as well, but alas, he held back. Xie Lian calmed Ruoye, who was ready to attack.

"So you two know each other?"

After crossing so many hurdles and finally finding someone, Shi Qingxuan looked relieved. He was about to respond when the man cut in.

He said in a tone that left no room for dispute, "No."

Shi Qingxuan raged at those words and pointed at him with his fan. "Is it so shameful to know me? What hurtful words, Ming-xiong! I'm your best friend!"

The man denied it resolutely. "I have no friends who would run around in that sort of attire."

"…"

Shi Qingxuan was still in his tattered purple silk dress, truly…a shameful sight. Xie Lian wanted to laugh at the thought that there were really people in this world who would claim to be someone's "best friend" to validate themselves. It was definitely Shi Qingxuan's style. But "Ming-xiong”? If he remembered the five elemental masters correctly, the Earth Master’s name was Ming Yi.

Xie Lian spoke up. “Are you perhaps the Lord Earth Master?”

“It’s him. You’ve met before,” Shi Qingxuan replied.

Xie Lian looked Ming Yi over and wondered, “Have we?” He didn’t recall ever meeting such a character.

“You have,” Shi Qingxuan confirmed.

“We have not,” Ming Yi asserted.

“Yes, you have!” Shi Qingxuan said exasperatedly. “Before, at Banyue Pass! You guys didn’t forget that fast, did you?”

“…”

Seeing Ming Yi’s face go from ghastly pale to ashen grim, Xie Lian finally remembered! When they first met at Banyue Pass, wasn’t there a black-clad lady with Shi Qingxuan?

Hua Cheng had told him at the time that the black-clad person wasn’t the Water Master but was surely one of the five elemental masters. As expected, Shi Qingxuan was not only passionate about transforming into his own female form, he was also passionate about dragging others into doing the same. No wonder the black-clad lady looked extremely pissed off at the time, like she was disgusted. Recalling how Shi Qingxuan tried to wheedle him into “joining in the fun,” Xie Lian realized that it’d truly been a close call and was glad he didn’t give in.

“Lord Earth Master, are you the one who sent forth the Ascending Fire Dragon?” Xie Lian asked.

“I was,” Ming Yi answered.

They had found the right person. Xie Lian nodded and said, “Lord Earth Master is probably seriously wounded. We’d best make our escape now and talk later.”

Without any prompting, Shi Qingxuan knelt down and lifted Ming Yi onto his back. “Then let’s get out of here.”

The three retraced their steps, and Shi Qingxuan talked as he walked.

"I have to ask, Ming-xiong—aren't you good at fighting? You were perfectly fine back at Banyue Pass, so how did you get beaten up this bad in a matter of days? How did you piss off that Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

There was a bit of schadenfreude in his tone. Xie Lian mentally noted, *He's speaking as though he isn't afraid of being punched. They are good friends indeed.*

Ming Yi looked like he'd had enough of listening to Shi Qingxuan talk, and he spat, "Shut up!"

But this was also a question Xie Lian wanted the answer to, so he adjusted his wording: "Lord Earth Master, why would Hua Cheng give you trouble?"

Ming Yi didn't tell him to shut up, but he didn't answer either. Xie Lian turned his head to look at him and saw he had his eyes closed. After days of imprisonment and interrogation, and being so badly wounded, Ming Yi must've felt so relieved by their sudden rescue that he could finally relax. His questions weren't urgent anyway, so Xie Lian didn't try to wake him. The three ran up the stairs, and Xie Lian fished out his dice and rolled once more. He didn't know what number he rolled out in the dark, only that before them he heard a soft *clack*. A crack peeked open and light seeped through. Xie Lian pushed at the door and was just wondering whether he'd have the chance to take Lang Ying away too, when unexpectedly, the first step he took was hollow.

The moment he felt himself fall forward, he cried, "Don't come out!"

Xie Lian somersaulted through the air and fell on something hard. He felt brief relief that it wasn't a bladed mountain or a sea of fire[5] that he'd fallen into—until he looked up and realized that a bladed mountain or a sea of fire might've been better. Hua Cheng's exceptionally handsome face was only inches away from his, his brows raised high and his gaze locked on him.

When the stone door opened this time, it dumped him directly on top of Hua Cheng!

He'd fallen into the armory! At the moment, Hua Cheng was sitting on the grand chair of the armory, composedly wiping the scimitar Eming. Even when someone suddenly fell into his lap from above, he'd only moved his hands away and stopped cleaning without any air of surprise. He gazed calmly at Xie Lian, as if waiting for an explanation. Of course, Xie Lian had none and could only lie in his lap and stare back boldly.

Suddenly, he saw another person at the periphery of his vision, and when he turned to look, he saw it was Lang Ying.

That bandaged boy was sitting on the floor looking terrified. In fact, his hands were clutching his head while he stared at the two of them. Why was Lang Ying here too? It looked like Hua Cheng was interrogating him?

But when Xie Lian peered upwards, he saw half of Shi Qingxuan's white boot stepping over the void. There wasn't time to think, and Xie Lian quickly gripped Hua Cheng's shoulders.

"I'm sorry!" Xie Lian cried, then tackled Hua Cheng.

This tackle shoved Hua Cheng a few meters away, and he even tumbled a couple times before he found his footing. By then, Shi Qingxuan, with Ming Yi still on his back, had already jumped and landed with ease in the same spot Hua Cheng had just been sitting. Xie Lian forced himself to look back, and Hua Cheng was still looking at him without a word, but that one quirked brow was now arched even higher.

Xie Lian leapt to his feet and backed off a few feet, apologizing as he did so. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Lang Ying stared at Hua Cheng, seeming extremely frightened, and rushed toward Xie Lian to hide behind him.

Xie Lian shielded him and said, "San Lang, allow me to explain."

"Mmm. I'm waiting," Hua Cheng responded.

"Wait, shouldn't it be the opposite?" Shi Qingxuan spoke up. "He should be the one who owes you an explanation! He's the one responsible for the missing heavenly official! Be wary, Your Highness!"

This was exactly the situation Xie Lian didn't want to face.
He looked at Hua Cheng intently.

"San Lang, I don't know what misunderstanding occurred between you and Lord Earth Master, but why don't we talk this out peacefully?"

The best-case scenario would be Hua Cheng letting them go without harm. Although the Earth Master was wounded, his life was not in danger and he wasn't missing any limbs. If he dropped the matter, this wouldn't need to escalate. If Hua Cheng let them leave, then when they reported back to the Heavens, Xie Lian would do anything to beg Jun Wu for mercy, heedless of his own honor.

Unexpectedly, however, Hua Cheng asked, "Earth Master? What Earth Master?" After a pause, he continued, "Oh, did you mean the one on Wind Master's back? He's nothing more than an inept subordinate of mine."

Both Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan were taken aback at this.

"He's obviously one of the heavenly officials! How dare you say otherwise!" Shi Qingxuan objected.

Hua Cheng laughed. "Then I wonder why your honorable heavenly official would conceal his identity, leave behind his respectable title, and come work as an officer under me?"

Hua Cheng drew out his scimitar in a silvery crescent moon flash that followed Eming's curve. "If that is genuinely the Earth Master, then what commendable patience to put on an act for ten years. In the past decade, I had thought him suspicous from time to time, but there was never any proof. If I hadn't spotted him traveling alongside the Wind Master in Banyue, I'd still be in doubt."

In a split second, Xie Lian understood everything.

So that was what happened!

As it turned out, the reason the Earth Master had gone missing and been imprisoned was ultimately because he had gone undercover and concealed his true identity for a decade to serve as a ghost officer under Hua Cheng. To be blunt, he was a spy.

Once in a while, Hua Cheng would think this subordinate's actions were suspect, but without concrete evidence, he'd just kept him under observation. And it was only recently that Hua Cheng uncovered the Earth Master's deception: during their journey to Banyue Pass, Hua Cheng had seen the Earth Master next to the Wind Master.

Even disguised as a woman (with thanks to the Wind Master), Hua Cheng still saw through that fake skin. He'd discovered the black-clad lady was the ghost officer he suspected and locked on to his identity as one of the five elemental masters.

After the Banyue case was over, Hua Cheng probably left Puqi Shrine to settle his score with the Earth Master. It may have been during that deadly pursuit and dire circumstances that Ming Yi set off the distress signal. Then Jun Wu summoned Xie Lian and gave him the mission to launch this rescue.

That a heavenly official failed to mind his duties and instead went undercover in the Ghost Realm for over a decade was quite the scandal. Never mind the politics behind it; if Ming Yi was to remain imprisoned and tortured, all heaven would break loose if he actually died at Hua Cheng's hands—the world would be gripped by absolute chaos. If that day came, no one would be spared.

After thinking all this through, Xie Lian could only say, "I understand that the fault is ours. But San Lang, I still hope you will let us go this time around."

Hua Cheng watched him intently, then after a moment, he said quietly, "Your Highness, some things are best not to get involved in overmuch."

Suddenly, Shi Qingxuan cried from the side, "Wind, come to me!"

The moment the fan came out, wild gusts started blowing through the armory. The weapons on the walls and shelves began to rattle, humming and moaning.

"Lord Wind Master! We haven't done anything yet!!" Xie Lian was bewildered.

"I don't think either of you are going to make a move first," Shi Qingxuan said. "So, I'll be the bad guy. WIIIIIIND! COME TO ME!!"

There was an enormous cracking sound, and Xie Lian could feel clumps of dust falling from above his head. He looked up and saw that one side of the roof was being raised by the gusts, breaking at the seams and forming a large fissure.

The armory had no windows or other visible exits. Shi Qingxuan's intention was not to fight but rather to escape through a crack in the roof!

Within the crazed gale, Hua Cheng's raven-black hair and maple-red clothes whipped wildly, but the man himself remained utterly unmoved. He smirked.

"You have a fan, and coincidentally, so do I."

Hua Cheng retrieved a fan from one of the armory shelves. It was small and intricate, its spine and leaf made of pure gold, serene and beautiful. Hua Cheng twirled it in his hand, then snapped it open. He grinned wordlessly, elegance suffusing his murderous aura. He flipped his hand and fanned, and a strong gust shot toward them with a blinding silver flash. The three dodged and heard behind them the sound of hail-like darts battering the walls and ground. When they turned their heads to look, row upon row of long strips of golden foil were nailed into the ground. Each piece was thin but deeply embedded, its sharpness and viciousness clear.

Every weapon inside this armory was a spiritual one, and any one he grabbed at random possessed equally murderous power!

Hua Cheng flipped his hand again, and another golden-foiled gust blew. The winds called forth by Shi Qingxuan were strong, but the stronger they were, the more dangerous the situation became. The armory was only a hall, and its space was limited. The winds raised by the Wind Master's fan would rebound around the interior and blow the golden foil whirling around them, dancing in this madness.

Xie Lian was afraid the golden foil would harm them, so he shielded Lang Ying and cried, “Lord Wind Master, please stop for now!”

The golden foil whirled closely around Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi. Shi Qingxuan wanted to stop as well, but the roof had been raised by his winds, revealing a crack. If he stopped now, all his efforts would go to waste.

Just then, the golden sheets encircling them suddenly flew upward all at once. There was a cacophony of clinking and clanking, then a person broke through the roof and leapt down, accompanied by showers of debris and dust.

The moment he landed, that person shouted, “Lord Wind Master, I apologize, but I just couldn’t sit still any longer!”

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. “Qianqiu, you’ve come just in the nick of time!”

The young man carried a greatsword, its blade as wide as a grown man’s palm. It was indeed Lang Qianqiu.

His greatsword was shimmering gold, but at a closer look, it wasn’t because his sword was golden but because it had sucked up all the golden foil. They overlapped and covered the entirety of the blade, making it look as if it were a massive sword forged of gold.

Lang Qianqiu’s greatsword was forged from a curious metal born of a lodestone mountain, and it had the amazing ability to magnetize and attract metal. As long as the opposing spiritual weapon did not exceed a certain level of spiritual power, once he gripped the hilt, he could mentally incite its ability and pull in all surrounding metals, absorbing them into his blade. Sure enough, soon the layer of gold foil was sucked into the sword, the gold disappearing completely. At this sight, Hua Cheng laughed out loud, closed his fan, and tossed it away behind him.

“Are the heavenly officials so pathetically poor that once they see gold, they can’t let it go?”

If those words were directed at Xie Lian, he would have pretended not to hear them. But they were directed at Lang Qianqiu, a noble born of royalty. He hadn’t cared for riches his entire life, and although he knew the enemy was intentionally taunting him, he was still provoked into a boiling rage. He raised his sword with both his hands and lunged at Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng drew his scimitar with one hand, twirling silver shimmers in the air, and calmly prepared to face the attack head-on.

Lang Qianqiu's strike used all of his power. He was like a newborn bull unafraid of a tiger, but Xie Lian could already see the difference in their ability. If this strike landed, it would mean certain death!

On the sidelines, even Shi Qingxuan, who couldn't deduce any such difference, watched with jittery alarm. He yelled, "Qianqiu! Don't!!"

But at such a precarious moment, how could a mere shout stop the arrow that was nocked and ready to shoot?

Unexpectedly, just when scimitar and sword were about to clash, a blinding white light exploded within the armory.

It was a light so immense it enveloped the entirety of the armory, and everyone temporarily lost their sight. All they could see was glaring white. Xie Lian, however, was prepared and could see with some difficulty. He gathered all the powers he borrowed from Shi Qingxuan in his right hand and transformed the energy to a giant flame before shooting it.

A corner of the armory was immediately ablaze. Soon after, Xie Lian released Ruoye and tied himself, Shi Qingxuan, Ming Yi, Lang Qianqiu, and Lang Ying together.

He shouted, "Lord Wind Master, blow us upwards!"

Even though Shi Qingxuan couldn't open his eyes, he still followed Xie Lian's directions. He raised his fan and snapped downwards. A violent twister formed on the flat ground, blowing toward the ceiling, and at last broke through the crumbling roof!

Ruoye had the five of them tied in a bundle and flew straight into the sky. In midair, their sight finally returned to them, and Shi Qingxuan could see that dozens of meters down below there were giant flames ablaze, black smoke heavy in the air—the armory was on fire. Afraid that Hua Cheng would give chase, he flapped his fan. Now he was truly "fanning the flames." The blaze instantly erupted in size from the wild gust, and embers landed on all the nearby buildings. Now over half of Paradise Manor was ablaze in a field of red!

With great difficulty, Xie Lian finally grabbed hold of Shi Qingxuan, who was fanning with all his might.

“Lord Wind Master, please stop fanning! The whole place is going to burn down!”

Startled, Shi Qingxuan cried, “All right, all right, I’m stopping! Let me go, Your Highness, your grip is too strong!”

It wasn’t until the Wind Master stopped his winds that Xie Lian let go. He looked down, and amidst the red flames, Xie Lian still spotted that crimson silhouette. They were too high in the sky and he couldn’t see clearly, but his gut instinct told him that at that moment, Hua Cheng was standing there, watching him.

He didn’t give chase, nor did he put out the flames. He only stood there, letting the wildfire devour capriciously.

Outside Paradise Manor, screams and howls roared from all over Ghost City’s streets, and crowds of ghosts ran amok.

Xie Lian couldn’t breathe, his voice had gone hoarse, and he mumbled to himself, “I…only wanted to start a small fire to create a distraction. How did it turn out like this…”

It was only a little earlier when Hua Cheng had leaned against the doors of that armory, half-jokingly telling him he wanted to give him the entire armory and every weapon inside, but now everything was engulfed in a sea of fire. Although there might be many weapons made of true gold that feared no fire, there were surely also many that could not withstand the flames. After all this burning, many treasures would be reduced to ash. Xie Lian had not expected the flames to grow so violently, devouring all of Paradise Manor.

Even if Hua Cheng didn’t consider it a home, it was still his residence!

Seeing how crushed Xie Lian was, Shi Qingxuan also began to feel bad. “Um…I’m really sorry, Your Highness! I didn’t think things through—I only wanted to escape faster. This is all my fault! It was definitely only a small flame at first… If Crimson Rain Sought Flower comes knocking for payback, you just tell him to come to me! Don’t worry, I can pay whatever amount! Money is never an issue!”

But money was definitely not the issue. Xie Lian closed his eyes, unable to speak. Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulder in consolation but suddenly felt wetness on his fingertips and smelled a strange, stark stench of blood. He turned his head to look, and his face lost color in alarm.

“Your Highness, what happened to your hand?!”

Xie Lian’s right hand, and everything traveling up from it, was covered in blood. His entire right arm was thoroughly dyed red, and the shaking that racked the limb could not be written off as a minor issue. Yet both his hands still firmly gripped the white silk band to keep everyone from being blown apart by wild winds.

“What happened to you?!” Shi Qingxuan cried.

Xie Lian came back to his senses a little and shook his head. “It’s nothing…just a small injury. I’ll be fine once we’re back up there.”

“That white light was you?” Shi Qingxuan remembered. “Your Highness, you broke those two apart?”

“I’m a swordsman, after all,” Xie Lian replied.

Shi Qingxuan had guessed right. At the moment right before Hua Cheng and Lang Qianqiu’s blades clashed, Xie Lian darted in. He’d randomly taken a sword from the stacks of weapons on the shelves and made two particular moves between the sword and the scimitar.

In the first move, he knocked away Lang Qianqiu’s greatsword. In the second move, he blocked the scimitar Eming.

The strength of those two moves was not only powerful but extremely precisely controlled. Even when Xie Lian blocked both blades, the force of the strikes did not rebound onto the attackers. This was because, with Xie Lian sandwiched in the middle, he had used his own sword and arm to absorb both attacks completely.

Lang Qianqiu’s greatsword was manageable, but Hua Cheng’s scimitar was a force to be reckoned with. The sword Xie Lian had used was one from Hua Cheng’s collection, so naturally it was also a formidable blade. When those two blades crossed, it blasted that blinding white light. With the two moves, the first strike against Lang Qianqiu’s greatsword caused a crack in Xie Lian's sword, and the second strike against the scimitar Eming shattered it to pieces.

All of this was done within a fraction of a second, faster than the eye could see. Shi Qingxuan looked at the tragic state of Xie Lian's right hand and determined that the whole right arm was probably badly mangled.

He said, "Your Highness, you're…so full of vigor. I can't believe you blocked them single-handedly!"

The Flower-Crowned Martial God: Sword in One Hand, Flower in the Other. Shi Qingxuan had only remembered the flower. He had forgotten that Xie Lian ascended because of his sword.

Thinking back on how close of a call that was, Shi Qingxuan's heart was still racing. "Thank goodness Your Highness had those moves, otherwise who knows how many pieces Lang Qianqiu would have been cut into by Hua Cheng."

The strange thing was, Lang Qianqiu appeared to be unharmed, but he remained in a stunned state, like his soul had left his body.

"Qianqiu?" Shi Qingxuan called. "Qianqiu, are you all right? Wake up! What's with you? Has your sight not returned yet?"

Riding on a tailwind, the group finally reached the heavenly capital. Dragging and carrying, they rushed past the Ascension Gates and ran straight for the Palace of Divine Might. Since Lang Ying couldn't enter the palace, Xie Lian settled him in a small side chamber. No one seemed to be on duty, so he shouted within the communication array:

"Are there any fellow heavenly officials here? Please, everyone, come quickly to the Palace of Divine Might! It's an emergency; we have a wounded official!"

As he shouted, Shi Qingxuan snapped his fingers and switched back to his white Daoist robes. He waved and released a hundred thousand merits. "It's two wounded officials!"

Xie Lian said hurriedly, "Lord Wind Master, don't get so excited. We can ask normally; there's no need to distribute any merits. Everyone will naturally come once they hear us."

“No, Your Highness,” Shi Qingxuan said. “You have to know, giving out merits works a hundred times faster than asking alone!”

Soon enough, a voice came from the distance, “Who’s wounded?”

When the word “who” was uttered, the voice was still far away, but by the end of the question, the person had appeared—Feng Xin. He entered the hall, looked at Xie Lian, then at Lang Qianqiu, his face faltering.

“I’m fine, but Lord Earth Master seems to be badly wounded,” Xie Lian said.

After a moment of silence, Feng Xin asked, “What happened to your right arm?”

“So what if he’s injured?” another voice came. “There are so many heavenly officials, and who among us has ever returned unscathed after a patrol?”

The voice was decorous and mellow, but the words were unpleasant—it was, of course, Mu Qing. He crossed into the great hall and also took a look at Xie Lian, then at Lang Qianqiu. Yet the face he made was the opposite of Feng Xin: he merely arched his brows slightly, looking like he was ready to watch a good show. Seeing how Feng Xin moved to check on Xie Lian’s arm, he bent down to check on Ming Yi.

He said, “So this is Lord Earth Master?”

During that exchange, a number of heavenly officials poured into the hall one after another. Earth Master Yi had always been inconspicuous and stayed out of sight, so for many, it was the first time they had ever seen him in person, and they bunched around, staring at him with great interest. The masses were mostly confused, not knowing why they were gathering at the Palace of Divine Might, but having collected the Wind Master’s merits, they had to come and check it out.

“Thanks, but I’m all right. Leave it and it’ll recover on its own,” Xie Lian said to Feng Xin.

Feng Xin didn’t mince words. “Take care of yourself.”

Xie Lian uttered another soft thanks, but when he turned around, Lang Qianqiu was staring at him with a dazed look.

“Your Highness Tai Hua, what’s the matter?” he asked.

Feng Xin also noticed something off about Lang Qianqiu and questioned, “Was His Highness Tai Hua also injured somewhere?”

“I don’t think so. Let me see,” Xie Lian said and extended his hand, reaching for Lang Qianqiu’s brow. Yet unexpectedly, with his quick eyes and deft hand, Lang Qianqiu seized Xie Lian’s wrist.

There was still some hesitation on Lang Qianqiu’s face, as if he had discovered something but still wasn’t sure. However, there was already fire burning in his eyes. Xie Lian felt the trembling of rage passing from Lang Qianqiu’s arm to his.

Now all the spectating officials had noticed this unusual situation and started whispering among themselves. Shi Qingxuan and Mu Qing both began to rise, and Feng Xin asked, “Your Highness Tai Hua, what are you doing?”

Lang Qianqiu finally moved his lips. He only uttered two words, but Xie Lian’s heart sank all the way to the very bottom.

“…State Preceptor?” Lang Qianqiu said through gritted teeth.

Xie Lian’s pupils contracted slightly.

The onlooking heavenly officials muttered, half guessing, half confused. “What State Preceptor? Who’s the State Preceptor?” Some were more astute and immediately figured it out.

Lang Qianqiu was the Crown Prince of Yong’an, and the State Preceptor of Yong’an during his time was the second of the Dual Evil Masters: the State Preceptor Fangxin. No one knew his origin or his background. Yet in this moment, Lang Qianqiu had Xie Lian in his grip and called him “State Preceptor.” Did this mean…that Xie Lian was the evil cultivator who brought ruin to Yong’an—the State Preceptor Fangxin?!

However, Xie Lian was the Crown Prince of Xianle. The Kingdom of Xianle had fallen at the hands of the Kingdom of Yong’an, so why would he become the State Preceptor of Yong’an?

His Highness Tai Hua was renowned in the Upper Court for his optimism and cheerfulness. He was never calculating, nor did he make things difficult for anyone, and he had never before shown such an expression: half despair, half rage…half enmity, half hatred.

Lang Qianqiu had Xie Lian in a death grip, his breathing growing harsher, and finally he said in a strained voice, “You… I killed you with my own two hands. Sealed you in that coffin myself. You…State Preceptor, you certainly are remarkable!”

Heavens. It would appear that something big was about to go down today!

Chapter 18:
The Villainous State Preceptor, Gilded Banquet Awash in Blood

FENG XIN WAS STANDING the closest to the two, and he looked at Xie Lian with unconcealed shock. Mu Qing's eyes were glimmering, however, and his restrained shock contained a faint underlying excitement.

Shi Qingxuan laid Ming Yi down and said, "Qianqiu, did you make a mistake? If His Highness was the State Preceptor Fangxin, why would it take you until now to recognize him?"

Another voice rang out from the sidelines, "Qingxuan, you don't know? Legends say the State Preceptor Fangxin was aloof, mysterious, and cold. He never showed his face in public and always wore a mask of silver. I'm sure His Highness Tai Hua must've never seen his face."

The one who spoke had his arms crossed and stood on the sidelines. It was Pei Ming. The mere sight of him annoyed Shi Qingxuan, and he swung his whisk.

"If that's the case, that means no one ever saw what the State Preceptor Fangxin looked like. Why must General Pei make it sound like it's a sure thing that His Highness Xianle is this State Preceptor Fangxin?"

When Shi Qingxuan and Xie Lian worked together, it was a ridiculous and hilarious affair, but in the Heavenly Court they were composed, calm, and poised, very mindful of their demeanors.

Just then, a snow-white figure appeared from the back hall.

Upon his arrival, everyone settled down. The chattering officials quickly returned to their respective places and bowed.

"My Lord."

Jun Wu motioned with one hand, and everyone straightened up once more. He walked willfully, and as he passed by Xie Lian, he tapped on his right shoulder. Fresh blood was still dripping down Xie Lian's sleeve, but with that tap, it ceased immediately.

After briefly checking over Ming Yi, Jun Wu stated, “It is nothing serious. Settle the Earth Master first.”

Thus, four medical heavenly officials came over to gather Ming Yi up and carry him away. Shi Qingxuan looked as if he wanted to follow, but seeing such tension in the Palace of Divine Might, he couldn’t not worry and decided to stay after all.

With hands clasped behind his back, Jun Wu returned to the throne before he spoke again.

“So, tell me. What has happened now? Why is Tai Hua refusing to let Xianle go, and why is Xianle bowing his head?”

Lang Qianqiu took another glance at Xie Lian and saw that he was still silent. As they were surrounded by heavenly officials and there was no need to fear his escape, Lang Qianqiu released his wrist and turned to Jun Wu with a bow.

“My Lord, many centuries ago, this man assumed the name of Fangxin, slaughtered my blood clan, and brought ruin to my kingdom. I demand a duel and ask My Lord to be our judge!”

Within the Palace of Divine Might, even those who had never heard the name Fangxin hurried to research the name within the communication array. It was a good thing Ling Wen was present to answer everyone’s query, as what was uncovered was truly an astonishing tale.

“The State Preceptor Fangxin was both the savior and teacher of the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu. He was eventually named as one of the Dual Evil Masters because of the infamous Gilded Banquet Massacre of the Yong’an monarchy.”

“What’s a Gilded Banquet?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Lord Wind Master,” Ling Wen replied. “This Gilded Banquet was a tradition taken from the nobility of Xianle. It was called as such because every wine cup, every utensil and piece of cutlery, and every other such serving tool was of the highest grade of gold, incomparably extravagant.

“At the very beginning, when the Kingdom of Yong’an was established, they vowed to the world that they would put an end to the culture of excess from the old kingdom. They swore that they would never repeat the same mistakes, that they would focus solely on the people. And yet after only a few decades, the old ways were relearned, including that culture of excess.”

Ling Wen continued, “On the night of the seventeenth birthday of the Crown Prince of Yong’an, the palace threw a Gilded Banquet in celebration. The State Preceptor Fangxin…it was at that feast, with a sword in hand, that he slaughtered every member of the royal family in attendance.”

The golden goblets toppled, and blood spilled like wine.

“Because of his late arrival to the feast, only the Crown Prince of Yong’an escaped death. But he too was almost killed.”

This coup was no doubt a huge blow to Yong’an. If it wasn’t for Lang Qianqiu, whose arduous efforts won the people’s hearts, the country would have certainly been plunged into chaos. It was with great difficulty that the upheaval was settled, and soon after, the Yong’an monarchy released a bounty for the capture of the fugitive murderer. When he was at last apprehended, Lang Qianqiu killed that evil cultivator, the State Preceptor Fangxin, with his own two hands. He then sealed the corpse within a triple-layered coffin before condemning it to rest deep within the earth.

However, the roots of the monarchy had been gravely damaged. It saw an inevitable, gradual decline until it was at last replaced by the next dynasty.

Lang Qianqiu’s glare was locked firmly on Xie Lian. “I never understood why you did what you did. You said it was because you couldn’t stand seeing us on the throne, but I didn’t believe it, and I never thought you wanted to overthrow the monarchy and take our place. But now I finally know why.”

The heavenly officials gasped, muttering to each other.

“It was revenge!”

“Ain’t that just it?! The Kingdom of Xianle had fallen, so he had to ruin Yong’an too. The Yong’an people killed his own royal parents, so he had to murder the royal parents of the Crown Prince of Yong’an. An eye for an eye. It’s pure vengeance!”

"But the ones who wiped out Xianle weren't from Lang Qianqiu's generation. Such retribution was completely unreasonable…"

"And here I thought the Laughingstock of the Three Realms was just a fool; turns out he's actually quite an aggressive character. Becoming a State Preceptor in an enemy state as his cover, slaughtering the entire monarchy in one go. Incredible…"

Xie Lian could feel Jun Wu's eyes on him and closed his own.

He heard Jun Wu say a moment later, "Tai Hua, you firmly believe Xianle to be Fangxin, but do you have proof?"

"The State Preceptor Fangxin was the one who taught me swordsmanship. How could I not recognize him the moment he struck?!" Lang Qianqiu replied.

The hushed whispers grew even more excited.

"Even if he needed to keep his cover intact, wasn't teaching the crown prince swordsmanship a little unnecessary?"

"Since his third ascension, we haven't seen him touch a sword even once. It's no wonder, he's afraid to blow his cover…"

Lang Qianqiu stated, "I recently went to Ghost City and faced Crimson Rain Sought Flower…"

As the crowd listened to him explain what transpired in Ghost City and about Hua Cheng, many of the officials shuddered just hearing him mentioned. Lang Qianqiu continued his story.

"When I was twelve, I was once kidnapped during an outing. The kidnappers dragged me into the streets, and when the guards caught up, there was a violent brawl. A street busker was dragged into the chaos and, bruised as he was, he broke up the fight with a mere tree branch. With it, he easily parried two swords and rescued me.

"The kidnappers and the guards had all suffered grave injuries, and so it was this busker who helped me escape and escorted me all the way back to the palace. Out of immense gratitude, His Majesty my father and my mother the queen fervently tried to retain him and discovered his tremendous ability in swordsmanship. So he was ultimately invited to become our State Preceptor. He taught me the art of the blade for five years, and I’m more than familiar with his style. How could I be mistaken?”

“Your Highness Tai Hua,” Mu Qing said quietly, “you said yourself that what you saw was only a fleeting image. No one has confirmed it except you. Thus, these accusations are only by your word.”

Mu Qing’s argument sounded like it was in Xie Lian’s favor, but the truth was more complex than that. Mu Qing must’ve determined that Lang Qianqiu was quite convinced of his take on the evidence, and the more he doubted the truth, the more adamant Lang Qianqiu would be to prove himself. This was not the least bit helpful to Xie Lian’s situation.

Sure enough, Lang Qianqiu demanded of the crowd, “Fine. Bring me a sword, please!”

There were many martial gods within the hall who carried swords, and hearing his call, a sword was immediately thrown in his direction. Lang Qianqiu caught it and thrust it in front of Xie Lian.

“Take it. We’ll duel right now, no holding back, using everything we’ve got. We’ll see whether we have the same style and whether you taught me!”

Everyone thought demanding a duel in the Palace of Divine Might was insolent, but when they thought of the Gilded Banquet Massacre and how a dignified crown prince’s entire family was slaughtered in cold blood, they could understand his provocation.

Xie Lian’s injury was still on Shi Qingxuan’s mind, and Shi Qingxuan tried to reason with Lang Qianqiu. “Qianqiu, His Highness blocked that attack from Hua Cheng for you and injured his right arm. How can he duel with you?”

Hearing this, Lang Qianqiu suddenly reached out with his left hand and struck down heavily on his own right arm. There was a loud crack, and a mist of blood erupted from his right shoulder. Blood spurted profusely as the limb fell limp. Onlookers could see with no inspection that it was a severe injury, and everyone was shocked.

Xie Lian was also taken aback. He finally lifted his eyes. “What are you doing?”

"Lord Wind Master is right," Lang Qianqiu said. "You did injure your arm saving me, and so I return an arm in kind. But just as it's true that you saved me, your murder of my clan is also the undeniable truth. I know of your dexterity and that you can use a sword in either hand without the slightest effect on your skills. We'll duel with our lefts. If you're a man, pick up the sword!"

Xie Lian looked at the sword, then looked at him. In the end, he shook his head slowly. "I swore many years ago to never kill with the sword again."

His words made Lang Qianqiu remember that night, and the scene that greeted him when he arrived at the banquet: that black-robed man, his eyes frighteningly bloodshot, pulling a longsword from the dead body of his father with his left hand. The sound of it was like meat being butchered.

Shi Qingxuan swung out his whisk, and it wrapped around the sword to hold it in place. "I think there must be some sort of misunderstanding here. If that State Preceptor Fangxin always wore a mask, then anyone could've pretended to be him to commit murder. What does My Lord think?"

Everyone turned their gaze to the jaded throne.

"Xianle," Jun Wu spoke.

Xie Lian bowed. "Yes, My Lord."

"Do you concede that Tai Hua's accusations are true?" Jun Wu asked.

"I concede," Xie Lian replied.

The "I concede" was uttered frostily, the complete opposite of Xie Lian's usual manner of speaking, and the faces of Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and Shi Qingxuan all changed colors.

Jun Wu nodded. He then questioned further, "The State Preceptor Fangxin who committed the Gilded Banquet Massacre—was that you?"

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian raised his head, his expression one of determination. "That's right. It was me!"

His answer was loud and clear and left no opportunity to turn back.

"So you admit it. Good," Lang Qianqiu said.

As was previously explained, there were innumerable heavenly officials with mortal blood on their hands in the Upper Court. But truthfully, not many had their old blood debts escalate to this point. After all, most killed mortals didn't have descendants of Lang Qianqiu's caliber in their families, descendants who could demand justice from the murderer from the position of an esteemed heavenly official.

Pei Xiu was under the protection of General Pei, but in the end, he still couldn't escape exile. Xie Lian had no one to stand behind him. This would all depend on whether Jun Wu still valued his past affection toward Xie Lian and whether the Emperor had the heart to protect him.

Many still couldn't comprehend what sort of feelings Jun Wu held toward Xie Lian. During his first ascension, the Crown Prince of Xianle was of course treated with the utmost favor. But the two had a huge fight during his second ascension, and Xie Lian even stabbed Jun Wu a few times before he was defeated. This third ascension, the two had been at peace with each other, as if those past conflicts had been forgotten. Jun Wu had even built a brand-new palace for Xie Lian, located in the nicest area of the Heavenly Capital. It was truly difficult to understand. Thus, countless pairs of ears perked up, waiting to hear how the Emperor would sentence Xie Lian.

Unexpectedly, before Jun Wu had the chance to pass a verdict, Xie Lian spoke. "Xianle has a presumptuous request."

"Speak," Jun Wu responded.

"I humbly ask My Lord to remove my godhood and banish me to the Mortal Realm," Xie Lian said.

Some of the heavenly officials were shocked, and at the same time somewhat amazed. No one *wanted* to be banished, after all. It wasn't easy to ascend, and to work so hard and climb so high only to plummet… Just thinking about it made one want to sigh in lament. There was simply no way they'd dare ask for banishment from Jun Wu so straightforwardly.

At the same time, some of the other heavenly officials couldn't care less. In this sort of situation, it might be better to give up than to vehemently deny everything. Xie Lian had been banished twice already—a third time probably meant nothing to him. He should be used to it by now.

Lang Qianqiu, however, objected. “I don’t need you to banish yourself. Ascension is based on ability alone. I only want a duel.”

“I don’t want to fight you,” Xie Lian said.

“Why not?!” Lang Qianqiu shouted. “It’s not like we’ve never fought before. Life or death, the outcome doesn’t matter, let’s just put an end to this!”

Xie Lian said plainly, “No reason. But fight me and you will surely die.”

Chapter 19:
Enraged Nan Yang, Fistfight with Difficult Xuan Zheng

ALTHOUGH THE WORDS were said casually, gasps could be heard from all around. Many of the martial gods had the same thought: *You're nothing more than a powerless rubbish god! How could you be so shameless as to tell Lang Qianqiu, the one Martial God of the East, "fight me and you will surely die"? What arrogance!* It was like he asked to be banished because fighting Lang Qianqiu was beneath him. Absolute bullshit.

And yet Lang Qianqiu didn't seem to think he was exaggerating at all. "I already said life and death don't matter! I don't need you to let me off easy!"

Xie Lian ignored him and reiterated his request to Jun Wu. "Please, My Lord, banish me to the lesser realm."

Shi Qingxuan suddenly raised his hand. "Wait! I have more to say!"

"Speak, Wind Master," Jun Wu said.

"Everyone here seems to think His Highness Xianle assumed the name Fangxin and spilled the blood of Yong'an royalty for revenge. But if it was revenge, then why did he let the Crown Prince of Yong'an, His Highness Tai Hua, go? Logically, someone carrying out an act of vengeance would want to cut down the crown prince most of all. Am I wrong?"

It wasn't that no one had thought of this detail, but no one had thought it necessary to voice it. Now that the Wind Master had taken the lead in doing so, some nodded their heads in agreement.

Shi Qingxuan continued, "His Highness and I haven't known each other for long, but I did see with my own eyes him fighting head-on against the scimitar Eming to protect His Highness Tai Hua. Qianqiu, if he felt hatred for the Yong'an monarchy, why would he be willing to risk his life and body to defend you against the blade?"

When Feng Xin and Mu Qing heard that Xie Lian had faced Eming head-on, they both stared at him. There was a hushed grumbling of "Maybe he just felt guilty," but Shi Qingxuan immediately raised his voice to drown out the whispers.

"That was the Weapon of Misfortune, you know! The Cursed Blade itself! So I think this whole business is highly suspect!"

"I'm so envious that His Highness has gained Lord Wind Master's protection and is being defended so earnestly," Pei Ming said. "Too bad our Little Pei wasn't so fortunate."

"General Pei, don't muddy the waters," Shi Qingxuan said. "Can we even compare Little Pei's case to this? I saw him commit crimes with my own eyes, and I heard with my own ears when he admitted to those crimes."

"How is that different from what's happening here?" Pei Ming argued. "His Highness Tai Hua saw Xie Lian commit crimes with his own eyes, and he heard him admit to those crimes with his own ears. How is that any different?"

Shi Qingxuan grew furious and was about to argue back when Xie Lian seized him.

"Lord Wind Master, thank you. I am in your debt. But there's no need."

Shi Qingxuan hadn't thought of a good comeback for Pei Ming yet, so he only pointed at him, unable to get any further words out.

Finally, Jun Wu spoke, his tone tranquil. "Everyone, please calm yourselves."

His voice wasn't particularly loud, very serene actually, yet everyone within the Palace of Divine Might heard his words clearly, and they all moved back to their designated positions. Once the hall settled down, Jun Wu spoke again.

"Tai Hua, your actions have always been impulsive. When situations arise, one must not be rash. Listen with a cool head, assess, and then evaluate once you know the whole story."

Lang Qianqiu lowered his head to heed the lesson.

Jun Wu continued, "Xianle refuses to give us that full story, so his request for banishment is denied. He will be detained in the Palace of

Xianle, and I will personally interrogate him. The two of you shall not meet until I do so."

It was a conclusion no one had expected: Jun Wu had actually shielded Xie Lian, the Laughingstock of the Three Realms who had neither temples, nor devotees, nor merits!

Lang Qianqiu was the martial god who ruled the east; if he was unhappy with the verdict, then what a losing business this would be! Even so, Jun Wu chose to shield Xie Lian… Didn't that mean he was still very much in the Emperor's favor?!

Many of the officials now saw which way the wind was blowing and decided that, going forward, they wouldn't publicly say the words "Laughingstock of the Three Realms." Shi Qingxuan let out a sigh of relief and loudly praised Jun Wu for his wisdom. Lang Qianqiu, on the other hand, only stared intently at Xie Lian.

"Whatever My Lord wishes to learn from his questioning, he is free to try. But whatever the conclusion, I will still duel him!"

With that, Lang Qianqiu bowed to Jun Wu, then turned and left the hall. At the wave of Jun Wu's hand, a pair of martial officials came forward to escort Xie Lian away.

As they passed by Shi Qingxuan, Xie Lian spoke quietly to him, "Lord Wind Master, thanks for everything. But if you really do want to help me, don't say any more on my behalf—instead, can I ask you to do two things for me?"

Shi Qingxuan was still feeling guilty about fanning the fire that burned down Paradise Manor, and he wished dearly that Xie Lian would ask him for a hundred things. "Whatever you need."

"The boy I brought up here with me is in the side palace. Please take care of him," Xie Lian said.

"A trivial matter! What's the second thing?" Shi Qingxuan said.

"If General Pei decides he wants to make things difficult for Banyue in the future, please help her out."

"Of course," Shi Qingxuan replied. "I won't let Pei Ming get his way. Where is she?"

“I’ve hidden her in a small pickle jar in my Puqi Shrine. If you can, please air her out on occasion,” Xie Lian said.

“…”

After allowing Xie Lian to thank the Wind Master, the two heavenly officials brought him to the Palace of Xianle.

“Please, Your Highness,” they said courteously as they excused themselves.

Xie Lian bowed his head. “Thanks for the trouble.”

Stepping through the front gates, Xie Lian closed the doors behind him. Looking around, it was all as he expected, all as he remembered. The palace’s appearance and all its rooms and facilities were exactly the same as his previous Palace of Xianle. The last time he passed by, he didn’t enter. He would never have guessed that the first time he set foot in here would be due to a house arrest. Not the best sign.

But after so much excitement over the past few days, Xie Lian felt drained. He passed out immediately.

He dreamt of many things.

He seemed to be meditating with his eyes closed, and when he blinked his eyes open, he found himself sitting upright before a desk. His black robes flowed on the floor in layers around him, and on his face there was a cold, heavy mask.

When he looked down, the sight before him was a young boy sprawled over the desk. The boy appeared to be fourteen or fifteen years of age and was dressed sumptuously. His form strummed with life, but he was fast asleep all the same.

He shook his head and walked over. Bending slightly, he knocked on the desk with his knuckles. “Your Highness.”

Maybe it was because of that cold mask, but even his voice was cool. The boy woke up with a start. When he looked up and saw him, he jolted and sat upright immediately in horror.

“S-S-S-State Preceptor!!”

He said, “You fell asleep again. Transcribe *Dao De Jing* ten times as punishment.”

The crown prince cried out in dismay. “Shifu, please no! Why don’t you have me run ten laps around the palace as punishment instead?”

“Transcribe it twenty times. Do it now, and try to write nicely.”

The crown prince seemed to fear him, and he sat up properly to start copying. Xie Lian then sat back in his original position and continued to meditate. In truth, everyone in the palace was a little scared of him. But this estrangement, this aura of untouchable and oppressive power, was one that he cultivated intentionally.

Perhaps it was due to this crown prince’s young age, but he could never hold any such fear for long. Shortly after he started transcribing the scripture, he called out, “Shifu!”

He opened his eyes. “What is it?”

“I learned all the sword techniques you taught me last time. Isn’t it time for a new technique?” the crown prince said.

“All right. What do you want to learn?” he asked.

“I want to learn the technique you used to save me!” the crown prince exclaimed.

He contemplated for a brief moment, then said, “That move? No.”

“Why not?” the crown prince asked.

“That technique is impractical. At least, it’s not suitable for you,” he explained.

The crown prince was confused. “But isn’t it useful? Using one sword to dissolve the power of two swords! You saved me with that technique!”

It was normal for the crown prince not to understand. He said, “Your Royal Highness, let me ask you a question.”

“Go ahead!”

“There were once two people, eyes bloodshot with hunger. They started fighting, each hoping to rob the other of their food. In came a third person, and he wanted to stop the fight. Do you think words would be effective in this situation?”

“…I don’t think so? Talking would be useless. They only want food, right?”

“Correct. Because the root of the problem hasn’t been solved, no one will listen to your grand explanations. Thus, the only way this third person can stop the fight is to provide what they want. To give them food from his own purse.”

The crown prince seemed to understand but also seemed not to.

“The reasoning now is the same. You must understand that the moment a sword is unsheathed, someone will be hurt. When force is released, something must receive it.

Thus, it is wrong to say I dissolved the force of two swords. Nothing was dissolved; I absorbed their attacks. To stop an attack by hurting oneself is a foolish technique and only to be used when there are no other alternatives.

As a noble crown prince, you’ve no use for something like that.”

The crown prince continued to copy his scriptures, but he still looked contemplative a while later.

He asked, “Do you have any other questions?”

After a moment of hesitation, the crown prince said, “One thing. Shifu, if the third person didn’t have enough food, what then?”

“…”

The crown prince continued, “If both of the hungry had gotten food, but wanted more, and fought harder because of greed and sought more food from the third person, what should be done?”

“What do you think?” he asked.

The crown prince pondered and said, “I don’t know… Maybe he shouldn’t have intervened from the start.”

***

The great hall was gold. Everything was gold. Right now, however, it was awash with red.

At every golden banquet table, a person was sprawled. Their throats were slit, all tragic deaths.

The hand that gripped the sword wouldn’t stop shaking. The stately king was covered in blood, and his eyes were red, filled with pain and hate. By his feet was the dead body of the queen. With sword in hand, he took one step after another and made his way over. When the king looked up and saw him, he was supremely dumbfounded.

“State Preceptor? You…”

The sword struck with cold, cruel force.

Just then, he sensed something and whipped his head around. The young crown prince stood outside the door amidst the corpses of guards strewn across the entrance floor. The boy’s eyes were blank, as if doubting what he saw was real. He took a step forward and almost tripped on the threshold, dazed and disoriented.

He withdrew the sword, and blood splattered his black robes.

The crown prince hadn’t tripped on the threshold but on the dead bodies sprawled on the ground. He threw himself on the king’s body, his voice finally returning.

“Father?! Mother?!”

But the king would never speak again. The crown prince couldn’t shake his father awake. He whipped his head around toward him, his eyes wide.

“Shifu! What are you doing? What did you do?! State Preceptor!!”

It was a long while before he heard his own voice, devoid of emotion —

“You all deserved it.”

***

Xie Lian slept fitfully and rolled awake with a start.

He blearily rubbed his eyes and discovered he hadn't actually slept for that long, and moreover, he didn't even dream of anything nice. To the latter point, it was a good thing that something had jabbed him in the chest and woken him. He sat in silence for a while, then felt around in his clothes and found something. He opened his palm and revealed two dice, the same ones from Paradise Manor.

A sea of red floated in his mind's eye. The scene was blurry, but that crimson figure was supremely distinct, gazing intently at him, unmoving. Xie Lian sighed.

I wonder how much is left of San Lang's Paradise Manor. If I get banished again, who knows how much junk I'll have to sell or how long it'll take to pay him back…decades, centuries; if anything, I'll pay him the rest of my life.

Xie Lian stared at the dice for a bit before clapping his hands closed in a prayer; he shook the dice in his palms and rolled them to the ground. The dice rattled and rolled before coming to a stop.

As expected, all the luck he had borrowed from Hua Cheng was used up. He was hoping for another roll of two sixes, but it came up snake eyes.

Xie Lian couldn't help but puff out a rueful breath and shake his head.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming from behind. He stiffened and packed away both his smile and the dice.

The footsteps didn't sound like those of Jun Wu. Jun Wu's footfalls were steady and composed, quite unhurried. Similarly, although Hua Cheng walked with nonchalance and lacked decorum, often lazy and languid, his air of confidence and surety was identical to Jun Wu's. These footsteps, in contrast, could be called a little floaty.

Xie Lian turned his head and was taken aback. "It's you."

The person who had arrived was clad in black, his face fair and his lips thin. His expression was indifferent, appearing incomparably aloof.

Although a martial god, he looked more like a civil god. Who else could it be but Mu Qing?

He saw Xie Lian's startled expression and raised his brows. "Who did you think I was? Feng Xin?"

Without waiting for a response, he lifted his black robes and crossed the threshold of the door. "Well, Feng Xin probably won't come."

"What are you doing here?" Xie Lian asked.

"The Emperor detained you and barred His Highness Tai Hua from coming here. But he didn't say *I* couldn't come," Mu Qing said.

He didn't bother answering Xie Lian's question. Fine. Xie Lian wasn't actually curious anyway, so he didn't question him further. Mu Qing looked around the brand-new Palace of Xianle until his eyes finally ended up on Xie Lian. After looking him up and down, he suddenly tossed something at him. A blue blur glinted in the air; Xie Lian caught it with his left hand, and when he opened his palm, he found a small blue porcelain bottle.

It was a bottle of medicine. Mu Qing said apathetically, "It's pretty unsightly, dragging around that bloodied arm."

Xie Lian held the bottle but didn't move. He watched Mu Qing instead, a calculating expression on his face.

Since his third ascension, there could only be one phrase to describe the way Mu Qing treated him: passive-aggressive. It always felt like he was waiting for Xie Lian to get booted for the third time so he could make snide remarks. Yet now that Xie Lian might actually get booted that third time, he suddenly became pleasant—he even came specially to deliver medication. This complete reversal in attitude made Xie Lian feel quite disconcerted.

Seeing that Xie Lian wasn't moving, Mu Qing gave a faint smile. "Use it if you want. Either way, no one else is coming to deliver you anything."

It wasn't an insincere smile; it was obvious that he was genuinely in an excellent mood at the moment. Although Xie Lian didn't feel any pain in his right arm, there was also no reason to just leave the injuries be. That pat from Jun Wu was a quick, emergency fix, but it would be better to heal it with medication. Thus, he opened the small blue bottle and poured the contents onto his arm without any particular care. What came out of the bottle was neither powder nor pill but instead a faint blue smoke. The smoke circulated languidly, wrapping around his arm, its scent cool and refreshing. It was certainly a high-grade healing item.

Mu Qing suddenly asked, “Was everything Lang Qianqiu said true? Did you really kill those Yong’an royals?”

Xie Lian looked up and met his gaze. Even if Mu Qing had been forcibly hiding it, Xie Lian still detected a trace of uncontrollable excitement in his eyes. He seemed highly interested in the details of Xie Lian’s massacre at the Gilded Banquet—he followed with another question.

“How did you kill them?”

Just then, another set of heavy footfalls came from behind them. The two turned their heads in unison to see that the new visitor was Feng Xin. The moment he entered, he noticed Mu Qing in the main hall—who was even smiling as he stood next to a crouching Xie Lian. Feng Xin frowned with alarm.

“What are you doing here?”

Xie Lian waved the little bottle in his hand. Mu Qing schooled his expression. He had just said Feng Xin wouldn’t be coming, and then Feng Xin arrived the next second; not funny at all.

“It’s not like this is your palace. You think you can come but I can’t?” Mu Qing rebutted.

Feng Xin ignored him and turned to Xie Lian. He hadn’t yet opened his mouth when Xie Lian spoke up.

“If the two of you came to ask the same question, then I will give you the same answer. There’s no reason to disbelieve it. Every word I said at the Palace of Divine Might today was true.”

Feng Xin paled. Mu Qing loathed that expression of his the most and said in annoyance, “All right, put that face away. After everything, for who are you looking so pained?”

Feng Xin shot him a death glare. “Not for you! Get out of here!”

“And who are you to tell me to get out?” Mu Qing countered. “Speaking as if you’re so loyal. How many years did you last, again? Didn’t you run away too?”

Veins popped all over Feng Xin’s forehead. Xie Lian could sense this exchange was going in the wrong direction and raised his hand.

“Hold it. Hold it.”

As if Mu Qing were the type to hold it back. He sneered. “Everyone says you left because you couldn’t stand to see your former master fall from grace. What a pretty excuse. At the end of the day, you just didn’t want to waste the rest of your days following a broken man.”

Feng Xin swung his fist. “What the fuck do you know?!”

Bam! Feng Xin’s fist landed squarely on Mu Qing’s face. Mu Qing was fine of features—a standard pretty boy—and upon impact of Feng Xin’s mighty punch, it was like a persimmon had been smashed on his face—bloody and miserable. Yet he stood his ground, and without so much as a whine, he threw a punch right back.

When the two ascended, they both obtained their own spiritual weapons. And yet when anger overtook their senses, the best tools to release their rage were still their fists and feet. When Feng Xin and Mu Qing fought eight hundred years ago, their martial capabilities were at the same level, and after eight hundred years there was still no difference. Every thrown punch landed; the fistfight was messy and wild, and each of them held their own.

Feng Xin cried angrily, “Don’t think I don’t know your nasty thoughts! The more crimes he commits, the happier you become!!”

Mu Qing spat, “I knew you always looked down on me! What a joke! Do you see yourself?! What right do you have to look down on me? You’re the pot calling the kettle black!”

Lang Qianqiu and Xie Lian hadn’t even had a chance to start their duel, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing were already brawling. Their grudges had been building for a long time; the fight was uncontrolled and riotous, each cursing at the other without hearing what was cursed back, and they certainly had no mind to hear anything Xie Lian had to say. Xie Lian still remembered back when the three of them were younger: Mu Qing had been soft-spoken and well mannered, and if Feng Xin hit anyone it was only under Xie Lian’s orders, and he’d stop when Xie Lian said stop. That was no longer true.

Dragging his injured arm, Xie Lian rushed toward the door, hoping to call for help from any nearby officials. But before he put even a single foot outside the main hall, there was an enormously loud *BANG* that exploded from the front door. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were shocked into stillness by the booming noise, their eyes alert, looking to where the sound came from.

The front doors to the Palace of Xianle had been kicked open. Beyond the door wasn’t the expansive Grand Avenue of Divine Might of the Heavenly Court but rather a dead blackness.

And from within that darkness, innumerable chilling silver butterflies rushed out toward them.

Chapter 20:
Heavenly Palace Raid, a Short Salutation to Scare the Gods

THERE WAS A CONFUSION of twinkling silver light, and Xie Lian's unthinking reaction was to block with his hand. Ruoye, who was always wrapped around his wrist, would attack automatically if dire circumstances required it. Yet not a single silver butterfly attacked him; instead, they flew around him to furiously charge the two behind who had been fighting just moments before.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing had suffered before at the hands of those wraith butterflies—they knew how powerful they were and didn't dare to be careless. In only a blink, they'd both raised their hands at the same time and cried, "Shield!"

Millions of silver butterflies surged toward them, flapping their wings to summon blasting winds, but there was an invisible wall blocking them. The butterflies smashed against it like a tempest, like the battering of hail, and white lights flared from the friction with fiery sparks. The two had cast a spell to protect themselves, but even against a magical shield, the wraith butterflies were forceful and relentless, as crazed as moths confronting a flame. Despite mounting that spiritual defense, the two were pushed back by the relentless barrage of butterflies.

A moment of carelessness would give the enemy the upper hand. If they didn't release the shield, the butterflies would continue to push closer. If they did, there'd still be no chance for them to grab for their weapons before the swarm overtook them. Both Feng Xin and Mu Qing mentally groaned, gritting their teeth to hang on. Feng Xin stole a glance and saw Xie Lian was still standing right where he had been, with his head lowered. Not knowing what was wrong, he shouted to him.

"Your Highness, be careful! Don't just stand there—come behind the shield!"

And yet, when Xie Lian turned his head, not a single hair upon it had been harmed. He frowned. "Huh?"

The two looked closely and almost spat blood on the spot from their furious shock. Xie Lian was staring at them in blank confusion, a wraith butterfly held in one hand. Earlier, when the butterflies were gusting through like wild winds, there was one that was a little slow and couldn't keep up with the rest. As it flapped arduously in front of Xie Lian, he had a simple thought: that poor little silver butterfly was working really hard, but it couldn't fly anymore. And so he unthinkingly extended his palm just beneath it. Wings flapping happily, that silver butterfly had landed on his palm and now wouldn't leave.

Both Feng Xin and Mu Qing popped veins on their foreheads. "Don't touch that thing with your hand!! Don't you know what it is?! It's dangerous!"

Just then, Xie Lian felt a tightening on his wrist. Someone had grabbed hold of him and pulled hard. His entire body was drawn into the darkness beyond the door.

Although he was shrouded in darkness, he didn't feel any alarm or anxiety. This darkness was like a layer of gentle armor; not only did he not sense any danger, it actually somehow calmed him down.

Even if the person within the darkness hadn't shown himself, with those silver butterflies, was it so hard to guess?

Mu Qing cried in disbelief, "What audacity! You dare come cause mischief in the Heavenly Court?! What impudence!"

A voice laughed. "We're all the same. Weren't you heavenly officials of the Upper Court equally impudent in my territory?"

Even though Xie Lian already knew who had grabbed him, he was still a little startled to hear that familiar voice so close by.

Feng Xin shouted, "Hua Cheng, the Heavenly Emperor is here in the Heavenly Court. You let him go!"

Hua Cheng clicked his tongue. "Do either of you have the ability to make me?"

With that taunting question, the giant doors closed heavily with a bang.

Xie Lian sensed a hand gripping his wrist firmly, guiding him swiftly along. It was black as pitch all around them, and the silver bells on those black boots chimed in his ears. The ground beneath their feet was uneven; the doors hadn't led them to the bright, open great roads of the Heavenly Capital but rather to a remote mountain valley.

Hua Cheng must've used the Teleportation Array to connect the front entrance of the Palace of Xianle to this mountain valley. But how did he do it? One would surely have to be a heavenly official to be in a position to do that, no?!

Xie Lian was about to speak when a voice exploded in his ear.

"Your Highness! Where are you?!"

It was Feng Xin. His voice was by his ear, but his person was not—he had shouted from within the communication array. Xie Lian's eardrums hurt from the noise and were further blasted by the terrified voices of several other heavenly officials.

"What's going on, General? Did something happen?"

Mu Qing also entered the communication array. "Bad news! Where's Ling Wen? Report to the Emperor—Xie Lian ran off!"

He usually spoke gently and courteously, but now there was a flustered tinge to his voice.

Ling Wen reacted immediately. "What? I'll go to the Palace of Xianle to take a look!"

An official cried in shock, "The Laug—His Highness ran off? Wasn't he detained in the Palace of Xianle?!"

Shi Qingxuan entered the communication array. "I just saw a bunch of junior officials of the Middle Court guarding the palace. You can only enter but not leave! How could he run off?"

Feng Xin exclaimed, "What do you mean, 'ran off'? Stop adding to the confusion!"

"Well, he ran off with someone," Mu Qing said.

"He was *KIDNAPPED!*" Feng Xin clarified angrily. "Your Highness, can you still hear us? Where are you right now?!"

In that moment, everyone was speaking with raised voices, and everyone was demanding answers. Once Ling Wen confirmed that the Palace of Xianle was empty, she began searching for Xie Lian's present location, and Shi Qingxuan distributed further flurries of merits. The communication array was thrown into complete confusion, everyone trying to talk at once; it was so chaotic that Xie Lian couldn't get a word in at all. He drew in a deep breath, but just as he was about to match the shouting and tell everyone to calm down, Hua Cheng suddenly turned around and reached over with two fingers.

Those cold digits gently touched his temple, and Hua Cheng chuckled.

"Long time no see. How is everyone doing?"

With the soft touch of his two fingers, Hua Cheng entered the heavenly communication array through Xie Lian. That nonchalant greeting was heard not just by Xie Lian beside him but by every flustered heavenly official within the communication array. Instantly, they fell into a dead silence.

"…"

There was a silent uproar.

No wonder! Such arrogance could only come from That Person!

Hua Cheng continued, "I don't know if you missed me, but I haven't thought about any of you at all."

"…"

There certainly were many heavenly officials in the heavens who secretly thought about him every day. But when they heard Hua Cheng say he didn't think about them at all, they began reciting scriptures to pray that the man would continue not thinking about them going forward.

Then, Hua Cheng snickered gleefully. "However, I've been fairly free recently. If anyone is feeling bored and wants to chat with me, I welcome them with open arms."

"…"

Given the circumstances, the meaning of that statement was more than obvious: "If anyone is brave enough to give chase, they'll be the next one I challenge.”

It was a challenge they were certain to lose—he would surely wipe the floor with them. Was this not a blatant threat?

The communication array had previously been boiling with excitement, and some martial gods were even proactively ready to heed the call, prepared to give chase. However, with only a short salutation from Hua Cheng, all such passion disappeared. No one wanted to be remembered by Hua Cheng. And so, they all pretended they weren’t present even while their ears remained closely tuned in to follow this development. At the same time, their minds were rolling with stormy waves. Such impertinence from that Crimson Rain Sought Flower! To come all the way to the Upper Court just to kidnap someone, and not just anyone, but the Laughingstock of the Three Realms who was already in hot water…

Silence befell the communication array; only Feng Xin was still swearing angrily. Hua Cheng removed his fingers as soon as he was done speaking.

Xie Lian blurted out, “San Lang…”

Hua Cheng, however, let go of his hand.

“Don’t mind them,” he said to Xie Lian. “Come with me.”

His voice was low, the emotion behind it hard to discern. Yet the way he let go of Xie Lian’s wrist was swift, almost like he’d been shaken off. Xie Lian was immediately reminded of the first time they met and how he had evaded his touch. Xie Lian froze on the spot.

At first, he had wanted to ask Hua Cheng why he had appeared so suddenly. He vaguely thought that maybe Hua Cheng had known about his house arrest and had come to his rescue, so when he called out “San Lang” a moment before, he was secretly a little happy. But with the way Hua Cheng had just shaken off his touch, Xie Lian abruptly realized—how could he think Hua Cheng would come to rescue him? He had just burned down Paradise Manor and the armory. Wasn’t it more plausible that Hua Cheng had come knocking to settle the score, or for payback?

Even if, in the end, the reason Paradise Manor had burned the way it did was because Shi Qingxuan fanned the flames, he was the one who kindled the fire.

The pair walked, one behind the other. The more Xie Lian thought, the guiltier he felt.

"…San Lang, I'm sorry," he apologized in spite of himself.

Hua Cheng suddenly paused in his step. "Why are you apologizing?"

"The reason I went to Ghost City was to investigate the missing Earth Master. I didn't tell you the full truth, so that counts as a lie. And you treated me with utmost hospitality, but I burned down your Paradise Manor and the armory full of your treasures. I am so very sorry."

Hua Cheng didn't speak. Xie Lian also knew that "very sorry" really didn't amount to much and added, "But I expect I'll be banished soon. After I descend to the Mortal Realm, I'll definitely think of a way to repay you and see if I can—"

"Why should you have to repay me?" Hua Cheng interrupted.

His tone was a little harsh, as if he couldn't listen anymore, and he abruptly turned around. "Did you forget that my blade wounded your arm? I hurt you, not the other way around. Why should you have to repay me?"

Xie Lian had almost forgotten the injury of his right arm. He was a little taken aback before he remembered. "My arm? My arm's fine; it doesn't hurt. It'll be better soon. Besides, it's only like this because I charged in and struck back against you. You aren't to blame in the first place."

Hua Cheng stared at him hard, his left eye unusually bright. Xie Lian noticed that he seemed to be shaking. A brief moment later, he realized it wasn't Hua Cheng who was shaking but the scimitar Eming at his waist.

That silver scimitar, hung over the red robes, was shaking nonstop. The eye upon it, shaped by silver lines, was also quivering. If it were the eye of a child, then that child was clearly bawling.

Chapter 21:
Adroit Dice Solely for the Safety of One

SEEING THE STATE it was in, Xie Lian unconsciously reached out, wanting to pet it.

“What’s wrong…?”

But Hua Cheng sidestepped and turned away, avoiding Xie Lian’s touch, and smacked Eming hard on the hilt. “Nothing’s wrong. Pay it no mind.”

After being smacked soundly by Hua Cheng, the scimitar Eming—the cursed blade that caused all the gods in heaven to tremble at the mere sound of its name—shook even harder.

Just then, Xie Lian heard Feng Xin again in the communication array. “How could Hua Cheng use the Teleportation Array within the Heavenly Court?! How do we open this door?!”

Shi Qingxuan cried, “General Nan Yang! Me, me, me! I think I know how! His Highness and I suffered this trick of Hua Cheng’s when we were on our mission. Take two dice and roll them before the door, then push to see if it’ll open.”

Xie Lian remembered now. Didn’t he casually toss those dice around for fun earlier in the main hall? He could still clearly recall having to run so pathetically for their lives in that earthworm tunnel and from those savage spirits. He quickly called out, “Stop! Don’t! Be careful!”

However, his voice never reached the communication array. His spiritual powers were probably almost depleted and would be gone entirely by the time his message was transmitted. Feng Xin seemed to have done exactly what Shi Qingxuan said without a second thought. How did Xie Lian know this? Because the next instant, Feng Xin suddenly swore loudly in the communication array. He cursed whenever he was agitated, and when he cursed, the words were often terribly vulgar—to avoid dirtying eyes and ears, his words shall not be repeated.

The heavenly officials lurking within the communication array asked immediately, “General, what’s wrong?!”

Mu Qing’s voice came next, and he also sounded quite dumbfounded. “What is this place?!”

It appeared that he had also gone through the door with Feng Xin.

“Be careful, guys!” Shi Qingxuan called out. “Different-numbered rolls will bring you to different places. What number did you roll?”

“He rolled a four!” Mu Qing said.

Feng Xin’s cursing also carried a trace of panic and terror, and Xie Lian was worried they had met with danger.

The caster of this spell was right next to him, and he had no time to worry about any reservations. He hurriedly asked, “San Lang, what does a roll of four open to?”

“Depends,” Hua Cheng replied. “The door will open to whatever the roller fears most.”

Just as Hua Cheng answered, Mu Qing coolly snapped, “You fought to roll first and rolled out a women’s bath! Give me the dice, I’ll roll!”

Hearing “women’s bath,” Xie Lian covered his face with his hands.

Feng Xin had always kept his distance from women, his face changing whenever women were so much as spoken of—it was as if the female sex were savage, wild beasts. To him, a women’s bath really was the scariest place on earth, worse than the immeasurable depths of tiger caves or dragon lakes.

It seemed Mu Qing had successfully snatched away the dice, and Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. However, not a moment later, the two roared again.

Shi Qingxuan woefully called out to them, “Generals, what did you run into this time?”

There was no response, only odd burbling sounds, as if they’d been plunged into water. Everyone held their breath. After a moment, Feng Xin emerged within the array with a loud gasp, sounding as if he was spitting something out. It appeared that he had broken through the water’s surface.

He yelled, “Black Marsh Crocodiles!”

As it turned out, the two of them had hardly fled two steps out of the women’s bath before Mu Qing took the dice by force and rolled, and their next step had them falling into a marsh. They were immediately submerged past their waists and up to their mouths in the muddy water; after fighting to get out, over a dozen incredibly long crocodile monsters swam over to surround them. Each of the monsters was over twelve meters in length and had grown human arms and legs from years of feeding on human flesh. The sight of them moving through the marsh with those limbs stroking through the water would steal anyone’s breath with fright, and it was also really grossing the two of them out. Half-sunken in the black marsh, the two fervently fought the crocodiles until Feng Xin had finally had enough.

“Give me the dice; let me roll! You didn’t roll anything good either!”

Mu Qing was never one to admit defeat, and he shot a blinding spiritual blast. “Crocodile monsters are still more decent than a women’s bath! Who knows what you’ll roll next. Give them to me!”

“Fuckin’—” Feng Xin yelled angrily. “Didn’t you already take the dice?! Where are they?!”

The two had completely forgotten they were still connected to the communication array and started throwing punches again while denouncing each other’s luck in dice rolling, the dice lost and their whereabouts long forgotten. The heavenly officials in the communication array eagerly listened to them cursing at each other; the bigger the better when it came to spectacle. They were losing their minds trying to hold back their laughter, some even pounding their fists in their own seats, wishing desperately they could be watching this live to cheer the fight on.

Although Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s luck didn’t seem very good, those wild spirits and monsters didn’t really pose any danger. Xie Lian only prayed they would give up sooner rather than later and be released from their predicament. At the same time, he was thankful that he himself didn’t roll a number that called forth any horrors—that he rolled a Hua Cheng instead.

He spoke as he walked, “I rolled snake eyes earlier. Does that mean every time I roll a two, I can see you?”

As soon as he asked the question, he realized his words implied a bit too much, as if he had dearly wanted to see Hua Cheng.

But Hua Cheng replied, “No.”

Xie Lian felt a little awkward and scratched his cheek. “Oh. So that’s not it. I was wrong, then.”

Hua Cheng, walking in front of him, said, “If you want to see me, it won’t matter what you roll. I will appear.”

“…”

Xie Lian swallowed hard and forgot everything else he wanted to say. He hadn’t had the chance to dissect the meaning of those words before another voice spoke within the communication array.

“Let me!”

Not long after those words were spoken, a blinding white light slashed across the sky, and then there was the earth-shattering sound of metal cracking. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian’s path was blocked.

When the white light cooled and slowly faded away, Xie Lian finally saw what had flown in to block them: a sword.

His eyes slowly widened, and his pupils shrank.

The sword was long and slender, embedded deep in the ground on a slant. The body of the sword itself was still quivering from impact. Its blade was deep and foreboding, forged from what looked like black jade, smoother than a mirror—and if anyone were to approach, they could see their own reflection within it. The blackness was disrupted by a thin, silver-white line running vertically down the heart of the blade; it cut the blackness in half, like a ray of sweet love.

The name of this sword was Fangxin.

A figure landed in front of the sword and said, “This is your sword.”

After the death of the State Preceptor Fangxin, the sword he carried was kept by the Crown Prince of Yong’an. The one who had thrown the sword Fangxin and blocked their path was none other than Lang Qianqiu.

It would appear that though Feng Xin and Mu Qing had failed, Lang Qianqiu managed to roll the right numbers. It really couldn’t be said whether it was because of his luck or Xie Lian's misfortune. The only thing that could be said with certainty was, of the two crown princes, Lang Qianqiu had always been the more fortunate.

Hua Cheng stood with his hands clasped behind his back. He moved slightly, but Xie Lian immediately stretched out his hand to stop him.

He said in a low voice, "Let me."

Lang Qianqiu blocked the road, their only path through the heart of the valley. "Duel me. No matter how it ends, even if I die at your hand, I won't ask for any reparations, and I don't need you to ask the Emperor for banishment either."

Anyone could tell that until his demands for this fight were satisfied, he would never rest.

After a long pause, Xie Lian finally nodded his head slowly.

"Fine."

He took a few steps forward and approached the sword, gripped the hilt, and pulled it from the debris.

"You asked for this," he said softly.

After hundreds of years, Fangxin had finally returned to his hands, and it moaned softly in Xie Lian's grip. Standing close by, Hua Cheng's eye also flashed sharply at the sound of that sword's incessant cry.

With sword in hand, Xie Lian swung and pointed it to the ground before saying coolly, "However this duel ends, do not regret it."

"I won't!" Lang Qianqiu shouted.

Lang Qianqiu was so tense it felt like his head was going to split. Both his hands clutched his greatsword tightly, his eyes focused, his breath held; his sight was locked onto Fangxin—the sword that was black as jade—not daring to be careless for even a moment.

Xie Lian took a sudden step and lunged forth. Lang Qianqiu's eyes focused, ready to strike, when his body froze. It was as if he had been suddenly trussed up, and he fell heavily to the ground.

He looked down to find that he really was bound! A snow-white silk band had come out of nowhere and wrapped around his body several times like a venomous snake!

Lang Qianqiu had been taught swordsmanship by the State Preceptor Fangxin ever since he was young, and he revered the man deeply. This was why the moment Xie Lian gripped his sword, all of his attention was on him and his movements. He never noticed the white silk band that snuck behind to ambush him. How could there be such a shameless trick up his sleeves?!

Seeing that Ruoye succeeded, Xie Lian instantly relaxed his tense expression and fretful heart. He tossed Fangxin aside and heaved a long sigh, wiping away his sweat.

“Phew, that was close.”

Lang Qianqiu lay on the ground struggling to break free. He didn’t know how vicious that white silk band could be, and the more he struggled, the tighter it bound him. He cried angrily, “State Preceptor, what is this?! Let me go and fight me to the death!”

Xie Lian wiped sweat from his forehead and replied, “We already fought to the death. The thing that’s binding you is one of my spiritual devices. You already lost.”

Lang Qianqiu was incredulous. “How can this count? When I said ‘fight to the death,’ obviously I meant using a sword! If you’re a man, use a sword! Ambushing me with a white bandage? How despicable!”

He genuinely thought the sword was the best of all weapons and wasn’t thinking much about his words, but he sounded like a male heavenly official who was prejudiced against another male heavenly officials using white silk bands: he was insulting Xie Lian for not being a man. But Xie Lian didn’t care whether he acted like a man or not. He’d cross-dressed before, and he’d hung the words “I can’t get erect” on his lips. Nothing could get to him.

Xie Lian knelt down next to Lang Qianqiu. “You were simply unprepared. You never said I had to use a sword, so I used your loophole. Who are you gonna tell? Ambush is a battle tactic; cunning well used is called intelligent strategy. If your opponent had been anyone else, you would already be dead.”

Hua Cheng stood not far from the two and huffed a soundless laugh. But Lang Qianqiu was shocked to his core.

When this man was still the State Preceptor of Yong’an, he’d always taught him about being honorable and conscientious: press forward with indomitable will and make an all-out effort. He’d never thought there’d be a day he’d hear such words from the lips of his once-teacher. He was dumbfounded.

“State Preceptor, you’ve changed so much. You weren’t like this in the past.”

“I’ve always been this way, actually,” Xie Lian replied. “You just didn’t know. I remember telling you a long time ago not to venerate me as an incorruptible saintly figure, since I’m not who you think I am in your head. In the end, you’ve only disappointed yourself.”

Xie Lian rose to his feet. “Have a good, long think about it. And next time, don’t fall for your opponent’s tricks.”

Seeing that he was about to walk away, Lang Qianqiu immediately called out, “Stop!”

Xie Lian stopped.

Lang Qianqiu gritted his teeth and finally ground out the words, “You…owe me an explanation.”

“What kind of explanation are you looking for?” Xie Lian asked.

Lang Qianqiu’s voice quivered. “State Preceptor, my royal parents and I, did we not treat the remnants of the Xianle people well?”

“…”

That was indeed the truth.

Even after the Kingdom of Xianle fell, many of the surviving citizens never forgot their roots. After the Kingdom of Yong’an was established and began its rule, those people and their descendants continued to live on as the people of Xianle and often clashed with people of the new kingdom.

The first few generations of the Yong’an monarchy ruled with force and cruelly massacred many Xianle survivors when protests broke out. On the other side, there were underground alliances formed by the Xianle people to plot assassinations of the Yong’an nobility; they even succeeded a few times. This continued on, and the end result was a deep-seated hatred on both sides.

However, during Lang Qianqiu's generation, the attitude toward these remnants of Xianle was one of gentleness, the complete opposite. Lang Qianqiu's parents had wanted to unite the country of the old and the new, and against many Yong'an voices of dissent, the king granted a princely title—Prince An Le—to a descendant of Xianle royalty. The king even made him Lang Qianqiu's playmate to demonstrate their sincerity. Lang Qianqiu himself had viewed Xianle well and never held prejudices from any past hatred.

"You…" Lang Qianqiu said, "After what you did, there were many who said there must've been Xianle forces behind the incident. Many advised me to use that as an opportunity to thoroughly wipe out the Xianle people."

Hatred between Yong'an and Xianle ran too deep. Anything that happened to either side, they would deem the other the mastermind.

Lang Qianqiu continued, "But I overruled them all. Since you never gave any details about your identity, I told them you were definitely not a man of Xianle. That was how so many people of Xianle escaped death and avoided genocide. Because I forbade it."

Of course, that was a good deed. But thinking back on it now, the good deeds he'd done made him feel all the more aggrieved. It wasn't that his actions were unjust; the deed itself was correct. He simply felt deeply wronged. He'd acted with such benevolence, but he didn't receive equivalent kindness in return.

Lang Qianqiu's tone grew pleading. "State Preceptor, that day was my birthday."

He struggled against Ruoye's hold and strained to lift his upper body.

"Are you toying with me? A Xianle man killed my entire family, but I still have to follow his teachings and help all Xianle people? Are you toying with me on purpose?!"

Xie Lian didn't respond, and Lang Qianqiu continued to shout accusations.

"Was it because your seventeenth was a trial that you had to turn my seventeenth into a trial too?"

Xie Lian still didn’t respond.

Lang Qianqiu’s anger flared, and he yelled, “If that was your intention, then I won’t let you have your way!!”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened at those words.

Lang Qianqiu couldn’t stand, but his eyes flashed bright and his tone turned determined, as though a roaring flame were blazing within. He continued on, as if personally aggrieved, but also as if he was declaring war.

“If you want me to fill my heart with hatred like yours, I surely won’t! If you’re going to force me to abandon myself like you did, I refuse! I will never! No matter what you do to me, I will never become like you!!”

It was a declaration so heroic Xie Lian was stunned just listening to it. A brief moment later, he *pfft*-ed and burst out laughing, sound returning to him at last.

Lang Qianqiu’s eyes had been flowing with fiery tears, filled with passion, but all that was deflated by Xie Lian’s laugh. Bewilderment and anger filled his chest. Xie Lian clapped as he laughed uproariously.

“Good! Well said!”

Xie Lian couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so heartily, and it took him some time before he could stop. He rubbed his eyes. “Good. Remember what you said today—that you will never become like me.”

Hua Cheng still had his arms crossed and watched with a cool eye. Just as Xie Lian finished speaking, there was suddenly a blast of red smoke before him!

The explosion caught Xie Lian off guard and he jolted, thinking Lang Qianqiu might’ve used some weird trick. He dodged away rapidly, his senses on alert. However, the blast was disruptive in sound only and didn’t pose any danger. When the smoke cleared, Lang Qianqiu had disappeared from where he lay. What was left was a budaoweng[6] doll, swaying left and right.

The budaoweng doll had a very round face and body, like a giant calabash gourd. Its brows were long and its eyes black; the expression on its face was strong and good-natured like that of a tiger, though also brimming with naivete. At present, it was glaring, plump with anger, and it carried a fat sword on its back, mightily gallant in its form. It was exactly like Lang Qianqiu, except as a big, lovable toy.

Xie Lian stopped smiling and exclaimed, “Qianqiu?!”

Having lost its target, Ruoye returned with a whoosh and wrapped itself back around Xie Lian’s wrist. Hua Cheng walked over leisurely and flicked the budaoweng doll with his finger, snickering.

“Why does he look so foolish no matter what form he takes?”

Xie Lian picked up the budaoweng doll and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “This…this… San Lang, is this Qianqiu? Why did he turn into this? Stop playing around with him and change him back.”

“Nah. Bring him along and let’s go,” Hua Cheng replied.

“Go where?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng didn’t answer. Dice were tossed up, and they landed in his palm. In a blink, a cave appeared before them.

To turn someone into a budaoweng doll was such a mischievous spell, very much Hua Cheng’s style, but it was also hard to undo. In any case, Xie Lian couldn’t unravel it, so he simply held the doll in his hands. He was just about to follow Hua Cheng when he remembered Fangxin was still tossed aside on the ground and doubled back to pick up the sword. He strapped it onto his back, then followed Hua Cheng inside.

They hadn’t been walking for long before the narrow path they’d started on at the cave entrance began to get progressively wider. Footfalls echoed, and a faint light appeared in the distance ahead of them, and they could hear singing.

When Xie Lian was led to Paradise Manor in Ghost City, he had also heard singing, but the graceful songs of the charming female ghosts at Paradise Manor were enticing and beautiful—intoxicating like soft whispers from the Land of the Tender[7] But the singing that they heard now was more like the chaotic caterwauling of demons, disorderly and awful. The two were nothing alike.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but ask, “San Lang, what is this place?”

“Shh,” Hua Cheng quietly shushed him.

Xie Lian's question was already spoken in a near whisper; hearing the shush, he practically held his breath entirely. He soon discovered why they needed to be silent. Several floating green ghost fires drifted over from farther down the path, and when the balls of flame came close, he saw they were little ghosts dressed in green.

On the head of each little ghost there was a small torch light, as if each one was a big green candle. There was nowhere to hide in this cave, and the path was narrow. Xie Lian was about to reach for Fangxin, but upon deciding Ruoye would be better suited for this situation, he dropped his hand again.

But as the little ghosts passed them, they didn't bat an eyelash before moving on, still whispering amongst themselves. It wasn't that they didn't see them but more that they didn't think it strange to see them. Xie Lian looked at Hua Cheng, but the one standing next to him wasn't the exceptionally handsome red-clad ghost king he knew but rather another pale little ghost with a green flame on his head.

So it seemed that Hua Cheng had changed them into fake skins without Xie Lian noticing. Thinking that he must be bearing a green flame upon his head as well, Xie Lian couldn't help but raise a hand to feel around.

"Why must we…"

Why must they change their appearance into something so bizarre?

Although he trailed off, Hua Cheng obviously knew what he wanted to say. "I mentioned that the Green Ghost Qi Rong's tastes are vulgar. All of his lackeys have to dress like this."

Xie Lian hadn't expected Hua Cheng to bring him to the Green Ghost Qi Rong's territory.

Whenever the Heavenly Realm or the Ghost Realm mentioned Green Ghost Qi Rong, they all had to comment on how uncouth he was, and Xie Lian couldn't fathom why. But now that he'd learned that all of his little ghost subordinates had to dress uniformly like this, he could finally understand somewhat. If he only judged him by that self-given title of his, there was some peculiar form of elegance to the sound of "Night-Touring Green Lantern." But to literally have these "green lanterns" wandering around at night, there was indeed a gap between his initial impressions and reality.

“Didn’t you already destroy his lair?” Xie Lian asked.

“I did, but he escaped,” Hua Cheng replied. “Escaped for fifty years and built a new one.”

Xie Lian hugged the Lang Qianqiu budaoweng doll close to his chest and—after making sure no one was around—whispered, “San Lang, are you here to find the Green Ghost? Why don’t you undo Qianqiu’s spell and let him go before that, and then I’ll accompany you?”

Hua Cheng obstinately refused. “No, bring him with you. I need Lang Qianqiu to meet someone.”

Xie Lian was curious. Hua Cheng didn’t act like he cared much for Lang Qianqiu, so why would he take him specially to meet anyone? But things were awkward on both sides, so he couldn’t speak any more on the subject. When the two finally emerged from the cave and the tunnel opened to a wider space, only more caves appeared to greet them.

There seemed to be caves and tunnels dug all over this mountain; caves connecting caves, tunnels leading to more tunnels. Each entrance had many ghosts with green lanterns on their heads going in and out, like a giant beehive or an anthill. If Xie Lian had come in by himself, there was no way he’d remember the path. And yet Hua Cheng acted like he was at home and traversed the various tunnels and caves without hesitation, exceedingly at ease, like he knew the paths by heart.

The two of them both wore their little green-flamed ghost skins, so no one stopped them on their journey. Xie Lian exhaled in relief, but Hua Cheng thought he was sighing and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Xie Lian said. “I thought you would attack the lair head-on instead of sneaking in. I’m not too good with fighting, so I’m relieved.”

He meant it when he said he wasn’t “good with fighting.” While he was skilled in combat, he had trouble dealing with the aftermath. Hua Cheng seemed to puff out a laugh.

“I did attack head-on the first time, but the moment Qi Rong found out, he ran away,” Hua Cheng said. “This time I’m here for the ghost himself, so of course I can’t have him notice I’m here.”

Is the Green Ghost the person who San Lang wants Lang Qianqiu to meet? Xie Lian wondered. *Is there a relationship between the two of them? Well, whatever he wants to do, I’ll go with him. I’ll ask him to undo the spell on Qianqiu later.*

Xie Lian still had the burning of Paradise Manor on his mind, so he couldn’t help his guilty conscience. As he was thinking, Hua Cheng spoke.

“That useless trash can’t do anything, but he’s very vigilant. These little ghosts can’t get near him, and it’s not easy to disguise oneself as the henchmen he trusts. There’s only one way to get close to him.”

Just then, four little ghosts came by, laughing and chatting. Hua Cheng slowed his steps, and Xie Lian followed his lead. They saw that the little ghosts had a queue of bound humans behind them, dragged along by a long rope.

Among the collection of humans, some were ragged and unkempt and some wore extravagant clothes, but they all seemed to be young men and women under the age of thirty. There was even a child, clutching the sleeve of one of the young men; they were probably father and son. All of their hands were bound, each looking terrified and some even ready to faint as they trudged through the demonic cave. They brushed past Hua Cheng, and without missing a beat, he turned around and seamlessly joined the end of the march. He gently elbowed Xie Lian, and he imitated Hua Cheng’s actions. When he looked over, Hua Cheng had already changed skins again—this time, he was a clean-cut young man. Xie Lian knew he probably looked similar.

The little band made twists and turns through the tunnels and caves. The little ghosts leading the group seemed quite content in their duties, and from time to time, flaunted their meager authority, yelling and snarling at the prisoners behind them.

“No funny business! No crying! If you ruin our great ghost king’s appetite with your faces all covered in tears and snot, we’ll teach you what it’s like to want to die!”

Out of the Four Great Calamities, there had never been any rumors that the three supremes devoured human flesh. Only the Green Ghost Qi

Rong was gluttonous in this manner; no wonder his peers and enemies alike scoffed at any mention of him, mocking him as unsightly and ignorant. Earlier, Hua Cheng said there was only one way to get close to the Green Ghost Qi Rong—it appeared that mixing in with the “food” was the plan. As he walked, Xie Lian reached for Hua Cheng’s hand. Once he succeeded in grabbing hold of it, he felt Hua Cheng freeze like he wanted to pull away. It wasn’t that Xie Lian didn’t notice, but given the circumstances, there wasn’t much room for thought. He held Hua Cheng’s hand tight and lightly drew a word on his palm: “Save.”

Since Xie Lian had seen their plight, he had to save these people. The gesture was meant to inform Hua Cheng of his intentions.

After the word was written, Hua Cheng gently folded his fingers and closed his palm. A moment later, the group left the tunnel and made their way into a massive cave.

As soon as they entered the cave, a mass of densely packed objects appeared in their vision. Xie Lian squinted up at them, not quite able to tell what those objects were, when he felt Hua Cheng grip his wrist and draw a few words on the back of his palm: “Watch your head. Don’t touch.”

At first, Xie Lian thought that there were many rags hanging from above, but when he looked closer, his pupils shrank—what rags? It was clearly a large crowd of densely packed people, suspended in midair with their feet up and heads down.

The forest of upside-down corpses!

But despite the suspended dead bodies, there was no bloody rain. It was because these corpses were all dried, not a drop of fresh blood left flowing in their veins. Those dried corpses all looked like they were in pain, their mouths open wide, and there was a thin layer of snow-like crystals on their bodies and faces. Salt.

In the deepest recesses of the cave, the lights shone bright; there was a giant chair, a long table, golden goblets, and jaded utensils. Such extravagance made it look more like a royal banquet hall than a deep mountain cave. A bit farther away from the long table there was an enormous steel cauldron, big enough that more than ten people could swim within. Red, boiling water bubbled in the cauldron; if anyone should accidentally fall in, it would be mere seconds before they were cooked through!

The four little ghosts ushered the group of prisoners toward the cauldron, but some fell to the ground shivering in fear when they saw what was waiting for them. In the midst of all the yelling, hitting, pulling, and dragging, Xie Lian suddenly felt that beside him, Hua Cheng's arm had gone stiff and he'd stopped moving.

He turned to look and saw that although Hua Cheng still wore the appearance of a clean-cut young man, his eyes were blazing with rage.

Hua Cheng was always smiling, but Xie Lian knew that his true emotions were always hidden deep within. Xie Lian had never seen such violent, blatant fury in his eyes. He followed the line of Hua Cheng's sight, and in the next moment, he felt his own breath hitch.

Before that giant, extravagant chair knelt a person.

Or so it seemed, but upon a closer look, it was actually a life-sized stone statue of someone. It was a rather interesting statue: sculpted in a kneeling position, its back facing him, its head downcast. It was the very picture of a "homeless stray dog." One had to assume that the only purpose of making such a statue was to humiliate its subject.

And Xie Lian didn't need to turn the statue around to know that its face must be exactly the same as his own.

Generally, people didn't know what their own backs looked like, but Xie Lian was different. He was more than familiar with how his own back looked.

When the Kingdom of Xianle first fell, to relieve themselves of anger, the people burned down his eight thousand crown prince temples and desecrated all of his statues, stole the gems on their swords and cleaned their attire of gold. Yet after all that, the rage continued to burn, and so they came up with a new idea: building kneeling statues like this one.

The crown prince, once so highly venerated and worshipped, was sculpted into the form of one kneeling down and begging for forgiveness. These statues were placed in crowded areas of town so everyone was free to spit at or kick them when they passed and, in doing so, rid themselves of misfortune. Worse, some even had him sculpted prostrating and used the statue directly as a threshold so that tens of thousands would walk all over it. In the first ten or twenty years after the Kingdom of Xianle fell, those statues were a common sight in many cities and towns. And so how could Xie Lian not recognize his own back?

Just then, the voice of a young man said, “That mangy little cur Pei Xiu had to cling to the leg of that manwhore dog Pei just to ascend in such a pitiful way, so who does he think he is? He’s nothing more than an exiled stray right now. Ruining my plans… Once I’m through with him, even after the winds dry up his corpse, no one will dare go to collect it!”

Before the person himself had even appeared, they could already hear his insults. Xie Lian gazed over and saw a figure clad in green strut into the cave. Due to reasons not worth mentioning, Xie Lian couldn’t help but look at the top of his head first, and he was actually kind of disappointed to see that the figure only had a mask on and no light above his head. A bunch of little ghosts dressed in green crowded around this green-clad man, and he stood there surrounded by a circle of green light. This had to be one of the Ghost Realm’s Four Calamities: the Green Ghost, Qi Rong.

Ever since Nan Feng had first mentioned the name, Xie Lian had kept it in the back of his mind, wondering if this Qi Rong was the same Qi Rong he knew. However, there was an unspoken rule that, demon or ghost, one was to hide their real name and bury their past life. Because of this, he didn’t think they were the same person, only that the fake name had coincided with the real one. But from the looks of things, he was more than certain that this was the Qi Rong he remembered. How could there be a second Qi Rong who was obsessed with the statue of the kneeling crown prince? And why would his voice sound so familiar?

The little green ghosts that surrounded Qi Rong were loudly proclaiming him king and talking all at the same time. Xie Lian figured out some of what had transpired from their chatter. It seemed that when Qi Rong sent a few of his henchmen to Ghost City, they failed to cause any havoc and were decimated by Hua Cheng. He then regrouped and prepared to fight again, but before the second round had even started, the henchmen bumped into the exiled Pei Xiu on the road. Although exiled in the Mortal Realm, Pei Xiu nevertheless was once a heavenly official and also had nothing better to do—thus, when those henchmen bumped into him, he thought he might as well clean them up. And so they were decimated once again.

The moment Qi Rong received the news of how many henchmen he'd lost in such a short time, he was furious and started cursing nonstop.

"Like ancestor, like descendant—that damned manwhore Pei Ming probably has sores all over his crotch. I should chop off both his and Pei Xiu's rotten dicks and hang them at their temples, then whoever worships them will bleed pus with every step just like them!"

Xie Lian really had to suppress the urge to cover his ears. When Feng Xin got upset, his curses were the same, also too vulgar for the ears; but as much as he swore, it was obvious that his were only words of temporary anger with no real ill intent. Qi Rong's curses were different—their targets could have no doubt that he truly wanted to condemn them to die as crudely as his curses, and he was wholly unafraid to take cheap shots, thoroughly crass and obscene.

That group of little green ghosts agreed with Qi Rong loudly. He probably remembered the able subordinates he'd worked so hard to raise and continued.

"Too bad that fiery, good woman Xuan Ji was captured by those two shameless Pei curs and was wronged so miserably. She can't be saved, even now!"

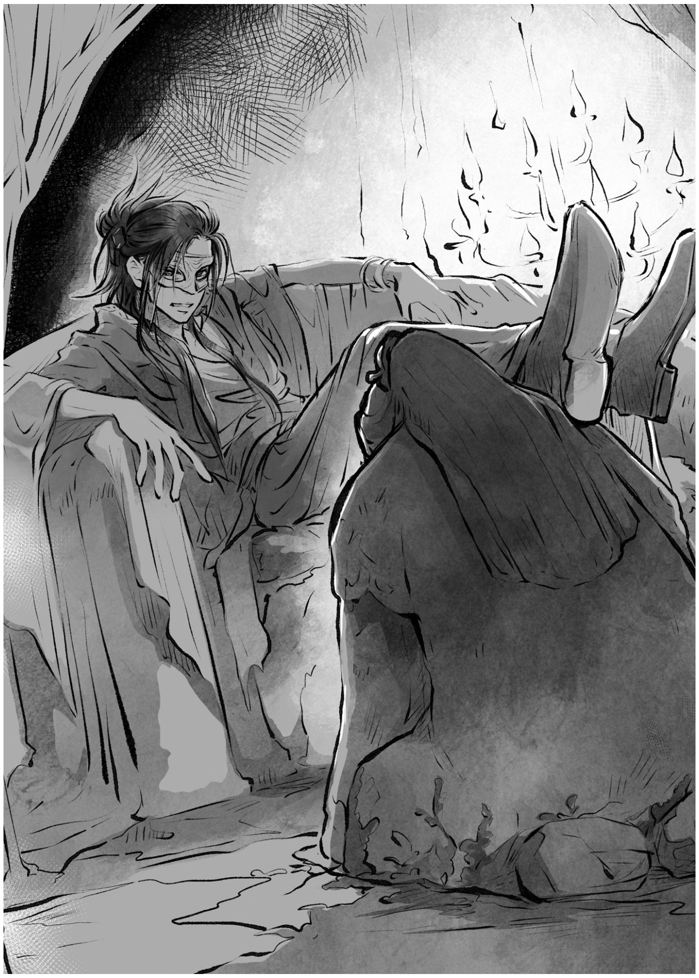
Xie Lian couldn't fully agree with those words. Indeed, Xuan Ji had a tragic story to tell, but not everything was General's Pei's fault like Qi Rong described. After all, those ten brides were kidnapped by Xuan Ji herself, and she was the one who killed them in cold blood. Fiery for sure, but whether or not she was a good woman was debatable. But to say Little Pei only ascended because he kissed up to General Pei was something Xie Lian couldn't agree with at all. After seeing so many ascend and fall over the years, there was one thing Xie Lian could say with absolute certainty: the skilled may not always ascend, but the ascended are always skilled. If one was powerless, then no matter who promoted them, they would not be able to overcome their Heavenly Tribulation and could at most be an official in the Middle Court. The only other issue was that ability did not equal status and that luck was also an important element—otherwise, Pei Xiu would've established his own independent temple by now.

Obviously, those things weren’t within the realm of consideration for Qi Rong. He swore like there wasn’t a single person in the Three Realms he didn’t want cursed to death. He called Pei Ming a rotten manwhore, Little Pei a kiss-ass, Jun Wu a faker, Ling Wen a damned bitch, Lang Qianqiu a moron, Quan Yizhen dog shit, the Water Master blackhearted, the Wind Master a tramp—he probably didn’t know Shi Qingxuan was actually a man. If Xie Lian wasn’t seeing it now with his own two eyes, he wouldn’t be able to believe anyone could be so resentful. Finally, Qi Rong made it to the main point, which was how Hua Cheng and that lurking Ship-Sinking Black Water looked down on him. They were mere supremes; one day for sure he’d make them kneel before him.

Xie Lian knew he should be angry hearing this, but because it was impossible to imagine how that would ever play out, he couldn’t help but find it hilarious instead. He stole a glimpse at Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng himself didn’t react but was instead still staring at that kneeling stone statue.

Finally, thank the gods, Qi Rong seemed to be assuaged by his tirade of abuse and changed the subject. “How did that thing go that I sent you guys to do? Have Quan Yizhen and that manwhore Pei started fighting yet?”

He sat down as he spoke, lounging on his luxurious throne. He raised his legs and rested his boots on the shoulders of the statue, using it as a footstool.



Xie Lian had been holding on to Hua Cheng's arm and stopped him immediately when he felt him shuffle a step forward. He worried that his tug back might not be enough, so he drew another word in Hua Cheng's palm: "Thanks."

Hua Cheng recognized the word. He lowered his head and glanced at Xie Lian, who was watching him with gratefulness in his eyes, thanking him for his good intentions. Then Xie Lian shook his head lightly and drew the words "listen" and "heaven."

Judging by Qi Rong's talk, it seemed he sent some henchmen to complete a task, and it had something to do with those two heavenly officials. It couldn't be anything good, so Xie Lian had to keep listening. As for the statue getting used as a footstool, considering he'd been used as a threshold before, this really meant nothing to Xie Lian. It was only a piece of rock, not really him. Although he had only written those three simple words, when their eyes met, Xie Lian knew Hua Cheng had understood their meaning. Hua Cheng slowly gripped his hand tight and turned his head away, so Xie Lian could no longer see his expression.

A little green ghost spoke up. "We've followed our king's instructions and spread the rumor that Pei Ming wants to make Pei Xiu the Martial God of the West. It's becoming more and more of a riot by the day, so we used that as an excuse and desecrated hundreds of Ming Guang temples disguised as devotees from the Palace of Qi Ying. And no one was the wiser! Ha ha ha, my king may not know, but all his devotees are really stupid! They saw us smashing temples and smashed along with us with even more enthusiasm!"

Qi Rong approved. "Keep fueling them! Quan Yizhen can endure it, but I refuse to believe that manwhore Pei can put up with it!"

Even if the rumors they were spreading weren't exactly false, malicious talk like this was still full of ill intent. Especially vile was doing something as unscrupulous as disguising themselves as mortals to sabotage temples and incite discontent. No wonder that whenever Qi Rong was mentioned, everyone in the heavens said that although he wasn't that capable, he was truly extremely annoying.

Xie Lian noted mentally, *If there's a chance, do tell Jun Wu to watch for any discord between those two heavenly officials that others might have* *sown.*

When Qi Rong finished talking business, he lay back, and his long legs resting on the statue changed position. The little ghosts immediately knew what to do and went to the small band of humans to pick out the best cuts. The one child in the group was probably not even ten years of age and wasn't very aware of his predicament. He blinked his large eyes and held on tight to his father's shirt, tugging at it the more scared he became. His young father's face was ashen pale, shuddering while trying to comfort him: "Don't be scared, don't be scared." Yet it was obvious he himself was terrified to the bone.

One of the little green ghosts saw there was a child and was delighted, reaching out to grab at him. The young father yelped and jolted. Xie Lian started moving before he knew what he was going to do, but then he felt the figure next to him dart out. Xie Lian turned his head to see, and Hua Cheng had stepped out from within the crowd.

Since Hua Cheng had come specifically to seek out the Green Ghost, he should've lifted his disguise now that he'd found Qi Rong. Xie Lian had no doubt that Hua Cheng was powerful enough to destroy everything in sight, and all would be powerless to stop him. Yet Hua Cheng did not reveal his true form and maintained the skin of that normal-looking young man as he lazily walked forward.

A number of little green ghosts raised their weapons and shouted in alarm, "Stop! What are you doing?!"

Qi Rong asked curiously, with his feet still up, "What's with that guy? Seize him."

Hua Cheng laughed. "Won't you all show a little respect in the presence of Xianle royalty?"

Qi Rong wasn't the only one shocked by those words—even Xie Lian was taken aback.

Instantly after, Qi Rong shot to his feet and snorted beneath his mask as if he'd laughed out of sheer anger. "What fucking audacity! To make such a joke before me?! Tell me then, what branch of the Xianle royal tree are you from? Which one?!"

Hua Cheng replied leisurely, "Prince An Le."

Xie Lian felt the Lang Qianqiu budaoweng doll in his arms jerk once.

Prince An Le was a descendant of Xianle royalty from the same generation as Lang Qianqiu. He was even said to have been friends with Lang Qianqiu.

Qi Rong's derisive laugh could be heard from under the mask. "Prince An Le? I think you're seeking your own death! Who told you to start shit in front of me? The person who sent you didn't teach you any history? Prince An Le was the last of the royal family of Xianle, and that family died out with him! Who are you to pretend to be Xianle royalty before me?"

Hua Cheng raised his brow. "Oh? Died out? How?"

Qi Rong shouted, "SEIZE HIM! SEIZE THAT WEIRD GUY!"

At his command, a large number of little green ghosts poured in from all around the cave, yelling. In the midst of that pandemonium, Hua Cheng only smirked faintly.

His expression had been nonchalant, but in a moment it was like a layer of frost had fallen upon his face. His form suddenly flickered and disappeared, then reappeared in a blink behind Qi Rong.

He grabbed the back of Qi Rong's head with one hand and smacked it down hard like a child playing with a ball.

"And who the fuck are you to be so insolent before me?!"

A loud *BANG,* and that magnificent throne was suddenly hidden by flying debris, with dust filling the air. Xie Lian tugged the young child behind his body to shield him and blocked a few small flying rocks.

When the dust settled, Qi Rong had disappeared. But on closer inspection, he hadn't disappeared; rather, his entire head was deeply embedded in the ground after Hua Cheng's strike.

Humans and ghosts alike screamed and dispersed.

"Don't run away!" Xie Lian shouted.

If the people alerted all the ghosts within the cave, they'd be killed for sure! But of course, as always, no one listened to him. Xie Lian dropped his hands helplessly.

In these circumstances, he had no time to worry about others. Across the cave, Hua Cheng slowly knelt down; he used one hand to grab a fistful of Qi Rong's hair and pried his bloodied head out of the large hole in the ground. With that motion, the body was extracted along with it. After a brief moment of observation, Hua Cheng seemed extremely amused and burst out laughing.

Although he was laughing, the light in his eyes was off by a million watts, eerie and terrifying. Ruoye flew out and struck away a few of the little green ghosts who were trying to cut down the escaping humans. Xie Lian then turned his head, his instincts telling him that something was wrong.

"San Lang? San Lang!"

Qi Rong's mask cracked, a few fragments falling. He spat up a mouthful of blood and yelled, "SOMEBODY STOP HIM! ALL OF YOU! COME AND STOP HIM!!"

Hua Cheng had been violently bashing him about earlier, but now he seemed at ease, ready to have a chat about anything and everything.

He snickered. "Oh, didn't you know? There are some things in this world that are unstoppable. Like, for example, the sun setting in the west. Or an elephant squashing an ant. Or me—taking your damned life!"

By his last line, his expression was unabashedly savage, and he raised Qi Rong's whole body high before smashing him to the ground once more!

Another loud *BANG*. Qi Rong's body was splayed on the ground, pulped into something worse than mush. With a soft crack, the mask on his face shattered into fragments, revealing half his face.

If anyone were to see that half, they'd discover a shocking fact…

The Green Ghost Qi Rong and the Crown Prince of Xianle—one ghost, one god, the difference of hell and heaven—looked astonishingly alike!

Chapter 22:
What Is True and What Is False, An Irresolvable Situation

BUT WHEN THE OTHER HALF of the mask crumbled and Qi Rong's entire face was revealed, it became obvious that he didn't look that much like Xie Lian after all. Their noses, lips, and the contour of their lower jaws were similar in shape, but their brows and eyes were quite different. Xie Lian's eyes were serene and gentle. Qi Rong's brows were high and sharp; his eyes were also much thinner and more slanted. While he was certainly still a good-looking young man, it was easy to tell from his face alone that he wasn't one to be messed with. After having been beaten to a bloody pulp, he could finally squint open his eyes and blearily see that the one who had seized him had changed form into what appeared to be a youth dressed in red. Qi Rong had never seen Hua Cheng's real face, but the moment he saw the red robes, he was both shocked and furious.

"It's you. IT'S YOU!"

Hua Cheng had changed back to his true form. "You haven't answered my question. How did Prince An Le die?"

Because of how frightening his glare was, Xie Lian rushed forward and cried, "San Lang!"

Humans and ghosts alike had already cleared out from the cave, and Xie Lian ran to his side.

"What's wrong? Don't be angry, please don't be angry, everything's all right. Calm down, everything's all right…"

He gently rubbed Hua Cheng's shoulders a few times, his voice growing soothingly soft. When Xie Lian was younger, whenever he got angry or upset, his parents would always stroke his back like this and comfort him with their gentle voices; thus, he used the same method on Hua Cheng. It turned out to be quite effective—Hua Cheng's eye was turbulent before, but after being soothed, his lip quivered for only a second before he slowly but finally calmed, and his gaze cleared once more.

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief at this sight. But suddenly, before he had fully relaxed, Hua Cheng swiftly reached out and gave Xie Lian's shoulder a gentle tap in return.

This tap instantly petrified Xie Lian's body.

He had not expected Hua Cheng to do anything to him at all, which was how he'd been petrified so easily. He didn't know what Hua Cheng was up to, but he wasn't worried about himself; rather, he was worried for Hua Cheng, afraid that he might lose control again. He was about to open his mouth to ask when he realized that he not only couldn't move, he also couldn't speak. This made him somewhat uneasy.

Qi Rong might have been weak when it came to fistfights, but his mouth was certainly tough, and he started cursing while still covered in blood. "You damned crazy one-eyed snake! Did I piss you off while eating in my own house?!"

Hua Cheng smiled, then smacked his head down onto the ground again before yanking it back up. "How did Prince An Le die?"

"What the fuck does that have to do with you—?" Qi Rong cried, and Hua Cheng slammed him down again.

"How did Prince An Le die?"

This process repeated for a while. Hua Cheng maintained his cool smile the whole time as he dribbled Qi Rong's head like a bouncing ball, brutally smashing it down over a dozen times. Although it was violent, Qi Rong couldn't die—but it was precisely because he couldn't die that it was so unbearable. Even a skull made of iron couldn't stand this kind of torture, and Qi Rong finally changed his tune.

"If you're so free, why don't you go read a history book?!"

Hua Cheng sneered. "If history books recorded the truth, why would I come and ask it of useless trash like you?"

He raised his hand again, and Qi Rong yelled, "IT'S LANG QIANQIU! HE WAS KILLED BY LANG QIANQIU!!"

The budaoweng doll in Xie Lian's arms jerked and started shaking vigorously.

It was shaking so hard that Xie Lian couldn't keep a hold on it; he could only watch helplessly as the Lang Qianqiu budaoweng doll fell out of his arms and onto the ground, spinning wildly back and forth. Hua Cheng didn't spare it a look, but he undid the spell. There was a blast of red smoke, and Lang Qianqiu's form leapt out from within.

Raised as royalty, high and mighty, he had never been wronged like this in his entire life. He pointed at Qi Rong in rage.

"How could you slander me so easily?! An Le and I were friends! Just who are you accusing of killing him?!"

Qi Rong was also shocked to see him jump out. "You're Lang Qianqiu? Why the fuck are you here too?!"

Lang Qianqiu still didn't understand why he had been brought to this lair. He was simply enraged by Qi Rong's accusations and felt compelled to clear things up.

"Prince An Le died of illness, so why would you randomly accuse me of killing him?!"

Hua Cheng looked on coolly and stopped dribbling Qi Rong's head, so Qi Rong got pulled into the argument.

"Died of an illness my ass, only you would believe that shit. He died soon after the Gilded Banquet, so he must've been assassinated by your lot! If not you, then those old withering Yong'an dogs in court."

He was muddying the waters with the garbage he was spewing; Lang Qianqiu's face was steely with anger.

"No wonder everyone says the Green Ghost Qi Rong is vulgar and crass. Now that I've met you, you are indeed disgusting."

That comment stabbed Qi Rong exactly where it hurt, and his face dropped immediately. After achieving fame, he'd been mocked for his vulgarity by all manner of gods and ghosts for centuries, both behind his back and directly to his face. He truly hated it.

"I may be vulgar, but that's much better than your ignorance. Friends this, friends that; what peaceful coexistence? Xianle and Yong'an can be friends? Can coexist in peace? You're as fake as your parents—how *revolting!*"

Hearing him insult his parents, Lang Qianqiu was furious. “Shut up! My parents were sincere and genuine, not fake! I won’t let you spit on their names and humiliate them!”

Qi Rong spat. “You’re all nothing more than the descendants of some rebels, so who gave you any damned right?! What sincerity? Granting titles and land to us, the people of Xianle? So shameless, gifting them their own property that you stole! Everything you owned belonged to Xianle!”

Lang Qianqiu was never good at arguing. He stammered, stumped. “You! You—”

Qi Rong saw that he had been angered to stuttering and felt a rush of satisfaction, and he resolved to aggravate him even more. He laughed. “Even if you guys killed An Le, that child had a profitable death. Xianle lost one man, but Yong’an paid an entire Gilded Banquet. Too bad we didn’t kill you too, so you could all taste what it’s like when your entire bloodline is ended!”

Lang Qianqiu was bewildered by this. “…What did you say?”

Xie Lian groaned inwardly.

He so desperately wanted to smash Qi Rong into the ground to shut him up the same way Hua Cheng had. But with this petrification spell, he couldn’t move a single muscle no matter how he struggled.

“What do you mean, ‘you didn’t kill me too’?”

Qi Rong only cared about avenging himself for the “vulgar” comment, so he continued to boast. “The fruit really doesn’t fall far from the tree! Sir, your stupidity has spanned so many hundreds of years that it’s opened my eyes! Think about it: we Xianle are thoroughly disgusted with you Yong’an; whoever doesn’t hate you is unfit to be called a citizen of Xianle! Did you honestly think the royal descendants of Xianle would be friendly with the royalty of Yong’an? It was all to coax out information for future plots and to paint your gilded birthday banquet with blood!”

Xie Lian was still struggling to break free, while Lang Qianqiu was frozen where he stood. It took a moment before he stammered, “…Prince An Le and the State Preceptor were…were on the same side?”

Lang Qianqiu was filled with anguish, thinking that his beloved teacher and his beloved friend had conspired against him together.

However, Qi Rong said, “State Preceptor? That evil cultivator Fangxin or whatever? Who the hell is on the same side as him?”

Lang Qianqiu heard his question and was puzzled again.

“You…you said An Le wanted to spill blood at the Gilded Banquet, but the one who did it was the State Preceptor? Were they not on the same side? I…” he trailed off, thoroughly confused.

“Hell knows where that evil cultivator came from,” Qi Rong replied. “It had nothing to do with him! Listen up, Lang Qianqiu—the slaughter at the Yong’an Gilded Banquet was the work of the people of Xianle! An Le had already planned to kill off every single damn rebel at the banquet, but then that weirdo State Preceptor suddenly busted in. An Le thought the plan had gone ass-up and ran to me for help, asking me what to do if his involvement was discovered. But that very night it was announced that the one who committed the Gilded Banquet Massacre was your State Preceptor, and *he* was the one who became the most wanted man in the entire kingdom.”

It took Lang Qianqiu a while to process that information. “If that was true, then why didn’t you say anything?”

Qi Rong clicked his tongue. “Are you fucking stupid? Why would I say anything? Why wouldn’t I want to have someone else take the blame? Can I get leveled up to a supreme for pulling off this lie?” He was relishing this more and more the longer he spoke. “Yoooo, I get it. You just can’t believe what I’m saying, right? I heard you nailed your own shifu into a coffin over this! Ha ha ha ha HA HA HA, you dumbass! You killed the wrong person!”

Listening to that vile, hearty laughter, Xie Lian closed his eyes and cursed inwardly again.

Lang Qianqiu cracked his knuckles as he raged. “…You’re wrong!” He then whipped around and shouted toward Xie Lian. “If this is true, even if he didn’t say anything, why didn’t you?!”

Qi Rong spat out a broken tooth. “And who the fuck is that? What, are you all here to have a party in my cave?”

Everyone ignored him. Lang Qianqiu demanded, “If you didn’t do it…if you didn’t kill them, then why did you admit your guilt?!”

Just then, Xie Lian’s body relaxed. Hua Cheng had undone the petrification spell. It might’ve been too late, though. Lang Qianqiu was waiting for answers, and Xie Lian stood up slowly, working out the kinks in his wrists and joints.

After a pause, Xie Lian blurted, “Complete nonsense.”

Lang Qianqiu had fully expected him to say “It’s true, just as he said.” Yet those words Xie Lian uttered so coldly completely rejected any relief of guilt from Qi Rong’s recounting of events.

Qi Rong was pissed. “Complete nonsense?! Says who?”

“Says me,” Xie Lian replied. “All these empty words. What proof do you have that the ones who spilled blood at the Gilded Banquet were the royal descendants of Xianle?”

Qi Rong seemed to find this funny and replied, “All those who were killed are dead, so what proof is there to give? Besides, it’s been hundreds of years. What proof is left?”

“Which is why I say this is all complete nonsense,” Xie Lian replied. “Xianle and Yong’an are dynasties of the past, long lost to time. Is there any point in you stirring up trouble with nothing but baseless bits of ancient history?”

The tone of his voice startled Qi Rong, and he narrowed his eyes as if remembering something.

Xie Lian turned to Lang Qianqiu and said calmly, “I killed your father; you saw it yourself. This was not long after my second banishment. I was filled with frustration and caused a great wrong. This is all my fault. There’s no need to drag anyone else down with me. This man is a deceiver; dragging Prince An Le’s name through the mud was only his revenge for you calling him vulgar.”

If any bystander listened in on this conversation, they would find it hilarious. A fight over the title of murderer? One would think massacring the Gilded Banquet was some sort of glorious achievement.

Lang Qianqiu was in turmoil and profoundly confused. He held his head and thought for a long while before he slowly stated, “That’s right…it was you and no one else.”

He had seen it with his own eyes. That night, he ran to the Gilded Palace excitedly, only to see the black-clad State Preceptor pull a long, thin sword from the chest of his father, splattering blood everywhere. And at that moment, his father, the king of Yong’an, had reached a hand out toward him, still breathing. It was only after he’d rushed over that the hand dropped limply.

Just then, Qi Rong, who was lying on the ground, suddenly spoke up. “Cousin Crown Prince, is that you?”

Xie Lian’s gaze moved back to Qi Rong. After staring coldly at him for a moment, Xie Lian stated, “Qi Rong, it seems you’ve been living colorfully over the years.”

As Xie Lian spoke, Hua Cheng removed his fake skin. Qi Rong’s eyes widened as the last of the intruders finally revealed himself.

Lang Qianqiu was dumbfounded by Qi Rong’s question. “Cousin?”

Even when he heard Qi Rong say “we Xianle” and guessed the identity of the Green Ghost’s past life as a citizen of the Kingdom of Xianle, he hadn’t imagined that Qi Rong and Xie Lian were actually related on a personal level.

Qi Rong stared at Xie Lian’s face and looked him up and down; it was a peculiar gaze, hungry with curiosity and fascination. When his eyes stopped at the sword Fangxin on Xie Lian’s back, he suddenly burst out laughing.

“SO THAT’S IT! THAT’S IT! FANGXIN WAS YOU! YOU WERE FANGXIN! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

Although Lang Qianqiu couldn’t understand why Qi Rong was laughing, it made him feel immensely uncomfortable. He demanded angrily, “What’s so funny?”

“I’m laughing at my good ol’ cousin, what’s it to you?!” Qi Rong snapped back in a fit. “Just now I said that your stupidity spanned hundreds of years. I’m sorry. I apologize. The best way to learn is to learn from the best—look at your shifu, no wonder you're so stupid!" He turned to Xie Lian. "You went to Yong'an, became their State Preceptor, and ended up stabbed to death by your own disciple, isn't that exciting? Isn't it *hilarious*? You deserved it, you pathetic fool!"

The moment he uttered the word "pathetic," Hua Cheng wrathfully struck once more. Qi Rong had always been tough-skinned, and for some reason seeing Xie Lian made him ten times more excitable than usual. Even with his face struck to the ground, he continued his indomitable shrieking.

"PATHETIC! PATHETIC! PATHETIC!"

Each time he said it, Hua Cheng smashed his head down again. It was an extremely gory scene, and Xie Lian stopped the hand that was about to strike again.

"San Lang, just leave it!"

"Why should I?!" Hua Cheng demanded sharply.

"It's nothing, don't let any of it get to you," Xie Lian said. "He's just mental and extremely troublesome. I can take care of him. You just sit back and ignore him."

He gently rubbed Hua Cheng's shoulder, and it was a long time before Hua Cheng finally uttered in a low voice, "Fine."

Qi Rong plucked his own head from the ground and arduously rolled to the side. He then spat, "Why play pretend with that false kindness? If you really didn't want him to hit me, then you would've stopped him at the beginning! Faking indifference now, telling him to forget it, no one's gonna praise you for bein' merciful!"

"I stopped him because I don't want him to dirty his hands. Did you misunderstand something?" Xie Lian said.

A trace of anger flashed across Qi Rong's bloodied face, but then he started giggling.

"Yooo, Cousin Crown Prince, you're getting along pretty well with Hua Cheng, aren't you? This little brother of yours[8] was wondering why none of the underlings he sent to greet you on Zhongyuan ever returned—now I see it's because you've been clinging to Hua Cheng!"

Xie Lian had no idea that Qi Rong had sent any underlings to find him. On the night of the Zhongyuan Festival, it was a coincidence that he bumped into Hua Cheng, and taking him back to Puqi Shrine also wasn't something he'd planned. It seemed that Hua Cheng had taken care of all of Qi Rong's underlings. At the thought of this, Xie Lian unconsciously stole a glance at the person next to him.

Qi Rong continued, "Calling him 'San Lang,' *tsk tsk tsk*, so familiar! Cousin, you're a big-shot heavenly official, how can you hang out with ghosts and demons? Aren't you worried about him tainting your reputation? You're so perfect after all, so pure and flawless, your saintly halo shines upon all of us on this earth, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha…"

Many in the Heavenly Court thought the way Mu Qing spoke was sarcastic, but if they were to listen here and compare, they would witness sarcasm in its primal form. Truly, they had wronged Mu Qing.

Qi Rong didn't just talk shit, he acted the part as well. He folded his hands over his heart and exclaimed, "Cousin Crown Prince, this little brother has thought of you *constantly* through the years. Look, I even meticulously carved this statue to keep you by my side, so I can gaze upon your valiant form every waking moment of every day. What do you think? It's pretty well done, right? Do you like it? Don't worry, it's better if you don't. I'll carve some more, ha ha ha ha ha…"

The moment he mentioned the statue, coldness suffused Hua Cheng's darkened expression; if it wasn't for Xie Lian holding him back, he probably would've gone over and stomped on Qi Rong's face some more. However, Xie Lian knew perfectly well what kind of person Qi Rong was: he was a little sick in the head, and the more extreme the reaction, the more excited he'd get and the more outrageous he'd become. Reverse psychology was the most effective strategy, so Xie Lian only smiled faintly.

He said, unconcerned, "It's only so-so. Sorry, but the craftsmanship is rather inferior."

As expected, Qi Rong's face immediately fell. He said coldly, "Be content with what you've got. If it wasn't for my affection of old urging me to carve you a couple of statues, who would even worship you? You probably sniveled and whined at Jun Wu's feet and hugged his legs 'til your knees were busted to ascend this time. Go around the Upper Court and see for yourself; which official *isn't* more dignified than you? Even a two-hundred-year-old ascendee could walk all over you. Over eight hundred years old and *this* is the state you're in? What a failure."

Xie Lian smiled. "I *am* quite the failure. Not like my cousin, already a wrath after eight hundred years."

Xie Lian knew way too well how to put Qi Rong down. Next to him, Hua Cheng snorted, and Qi Rong's face darkened for real. He looked between all those present and suddenly spoke.

"This attitude… Did you beg Hua Cheng to kick me around today to settle our differences?"

Xie Lian was taken aback. He thought about the current picture they painted and actually couldn't argue back.

Qi Rong continued, "Look at you both. The moment I say anything bad about you, whoa! Look how mad he gets. Was he blinded by that holy light from your halo? Yooo, I forgot! Isn't he already blind in one eye? HA HA ha ha ha…"

Before he could finish, Qi Rong's own sight went dark again, and his cheek exploded in agony as he spewed blood from his mouth—he got himself socked again! However, this punch wasn't from Hua Cheng, it was from Xie Lian.

Xie Lian's fist was faster than the eye could possibly track, and he said coldly, "Just because I've never hit you before, it doesn't mean I would never hit you."

His punch was a brutal one, and it was a long while before Qi Rong could say anything. He lay on the ground like a mangy dog, pounding the ground as he cackled.

"Cousin Crown Prince, you hit me! You actually hit me! Heavens, our noble, kind, compassionate, charitable crown prince, who's scared of stepping on even a tiny ant, actually copped an attitude and swung at me! HE'S HITTING PEOPLE! INCREDIBLE! AMAZING!!"

He was outrageously excited to the point of insanity. Lang Qianqiu had never seen anyone whose words and actions were so mad, and he was shocked into stupefaction after witnessing this singular act.

He mumbled, “Is…is he crazy?”

Xie Lian was used to seeing Qi Rong’s madness and didn’t think much of it. “You’ve heard him. He’s insane. He’s unbalanced, so you can’t believe anything he says.”

Qi Rong’s laughter came to an abrupt stop. He schooled his face and sneered. “Don’t be so quick to tell people I’m psycho. Let me ask *you*: How did Prince An Le die?!”

This was the question Hua Cheng had posed to him, and now he was turning it to Xie Lian instead. Lang Qianqiu’s attention was suddenly focused on it again.

Xie Lian’s mind was collected, but he couldn’t immediately answer. Qi Rong, on the other hand, slowly crawled to his feet and sat, leaning against the kneeling statue.

“After An Le died, I cut open his corpse to inspect it, and all of his organs were pulverized by the vibrations of an exceedingly powerful sword. That’s why, despite not having any external injuries, he couldn’t stop hacking up blood. This was something no ordinary swordsman could do. At first, I thought Yong’an thugs had brought in a special hit man to frame An Le’s death as illness, but now that I think about it, there’s another who has the ability, and who is that, *hmm*?! Of course, my good ol’ cousin, defender of justice! After all, our Flower-Crowned Martial God, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, is a holy, pure, one and only, snow-white lotus of the heavenly mountains…”

Hua Cheng stomped on him, and Qi Rong yelped miserably. Lang Qianqiu felt like his mind was going to explode; he held his head, his eyes bloodshot.

“Shut up! Just tell me what you know! Who’s the real murderer? What happened at the Gilded Banquet? And what happened to Prince An Le? What happened?!”

“Lang Qianqiu, why are you still confused?” Qi Rong asked. “Even *I’ve* pretty much figured out what happened by now. Looks like you really don’t understand the kind of person your shifu is! Come, come, come, let me dissect my good ol’ cousin for you: this former Crown Prince of Xianle went and became Yong’an’s State Preceptor, taught you swordsmanship for five years…”

He’d only spoken a few words when Xie Lian brandished his sword. But before he could charge forward, Lang Qianqiu’s greatsword stopped him.

“Let him finish!”

“You know he’s insane, but you’ll still listen to his nonsense?!”

Fangxin was swung, and even though it was a slender blade, its shock wave almost loosened Lang Qianqiu’s grip on his massive greatsword. But just then, a silver, curved blade flicked Fangxin, hooked it, and pulled it aside.

Xie Lian was startled and cried, “San Lang!”

Qi Rong could see how badly Xie Lian didn’t want him to speak and how desperately he didn’t want Lang Qianqiu to hear the story, so Qi Rong had to do the opposite. He grabbed this chance.

“Prince An Le was our good Xianle boy, very obedient! He heeded my instructions to become false friends with you, but your shifu bumped into us cleaning out the Yong’an rat’s nest at the Gilded Banquet. An Le escaped, you rushed to the Gilded Banquet and saw what happened, and State Preceptor Fangxin became the most wanted man in the kingdom. That’s the story, not a word of it a lie…”

Xie Lian tried to charge forward to shut his mouth a few times, but he was stopped by Hua Cheng every time.

Xie Lian cried again, “San Lang!”

However, Hua Cheng didn’t say a single word as he continued to block Xie Lian. The more Xie Lian wanted to charge over, the faster Qi Rong’s lips moved.

“But you know this saintly cousin of mine, when he saw with his own eyes the people of Xianle committing murder, he must’ve thought: ‘How can this be? That’s not right!’ So, he went to find Prince An Le to educate him a little, but when he sought him out—my GOD, what did he discover? An Le’s massive plot! The plans didn’t stop with assassinating some thugs! There was no way cousin could educate him, so he hardened his heart and killed the last scion of our royal house with his own hands! Afterward, you caught your shifu and nailed him dead in that coffin, and so ended my cousin's magnificent life as a State Preceptor. Cousin, am I right?"

Qi Rong spat a mouthful of blood next to the feet of the statue.

"I know you too well. You love doing shit like this. Ancestors above, look at what a good descendant you gave birth to! Not only has the Xie Clan of Xianle lost everything, now even the bloodline is cut! XIE LIAN! YOU UNLUCKY STAR, YOU GOD OF MISFORTUNE! YOUR EXISTENCE IS XIANLE'S GREATEST TRAGEDY! WHY WON'T YOU DIE? HOW DO YOU EVEN HAVE THE FACE TO KEEP LIVING?!"

"But I saw with my own eyes that he killed my father with his sword!" Lang Qianqiu said. "How do you explain that?"

"If it's not your blind, elderly eyes or water getting into your brain, then I can only think of one reason," Qi Rong replied. "Which is that An Le indeed stabbed your old man, but he didn't die."

"Then…did he finish him off?"

Qi Rong howled, "What are you saying?! My good cousin is such a kind soul—as if he would do that straight off! When he arrived, he'd be too abashed to finish the king off right away—he'd have to do a little show of trying to save the poor guy first. But, heh, your dad probably killed himself."

"What do you mean he killed himself?" Lang Qianqiu demanded.

"What's the first thing someone saved from an attempt on their life would do?" Qi Rong asked. "After seeing so many massacred at the Gilded Banquet, what would your first reaction be?"

Lang Qianqiu still hadn't completely figured it out. "…Find the murderer."

"Wrong!" Qi Rong said. "After my good cousin saved your old man and he found his breath, he would've certainly said, 'Quick, State Preceptor! It was Prince An Le who did it! Go and kill Prince An Le!' No, no, no, not just that, he must've said something worse, like, 'State

Preceptor! Call upon everyone! I want the entire population of Xianle wiped out! I want to bury them all with the dead!!'"

His imitative tone of despair and fury was disturbing to listen to, and Lang Qianqiu was growing paler by the minute.

Qi Rong continued, "Even if he doesn't order for their deaths on the spot, An Le also had the entire nest of your old hag's relatives killed in front of the old coot, so sooner or later he would have to open fire on the people of Xianle. Your good shifu realized this, weighed the options, and decided, no, the old man couldn't be saved, so *PLORK* and the old man's heart goes kaput. That's the kind of person my good cousin is, a saint who can't have sand in his eyes, always doing shit that hurts both others and himself; he wants to please both sides but succeeds with neither, hee hee hee hee, ha ha HA HA HA ha ha h—"

"Qi Rong, you shut your mouth!" Xie Lian shouted.

Lang Qianqiu whipped his head around. "Why do you want him to shut up? Because what he said is the truth?! At that Gilded Banquet, you and An Le both struck; one killed my entire family, and the other finished the act on my father. You're all lying to me?!"

Xie Lian started, "Don't listen to—"

Qi Rong cut in. "OF COURSE WE'RE ALL LYING TO YOU! You're so stupid, who else would we deceive if not you? If not for the interruption that spoiled our plans, Xianle would've already taken your damned life at the age of twelve, instead of giving you the luxury of growing up and ascending!"

"Twelve?" Lang Qianqiu repeated. The biggest incident that happened when he was twelve was that kidnapping, and he was saved by Xie Lian. He demanded, "That year, the culprits who invaded the palace to kidnap me were sent by the people of Xianle?"

"Duh!" Qi Rong spat. "Did you think ordinary assassins could just kidnap the crown prince from under the noses of hundreds of royal palace guards? Please. I was the one who helped An Le with that."

Lang Qianqiu nodded. "Helped? Good. I understand now. So all my friends are fake. The people of Xianle never cared for our amity. Your Prince An Le never had good intentions and instead came for our lives."

He turned to Xie Lian. “So everything you told me was false too.”

Qi Rong pretended to look surprised. “Come, come, come, quickly now, tell me what my saintly cousin told you!”

Lang Qianqiu ignored him completely and continued to address Xie Lian, “You said Yong’an and Xianle were but one nation at their roots; whatever conflicts the royals had with each other had nothing to do with civilians. Both sides used to be one family, and under our generation’s rule, there could be changes for the better. As long as the people were happy, it didn’t matter what the royal house was named, and both sides could let go of their grudge and unite in time. All that was false. All nonsense, bullshit, lies!”

This was precisely what Xie Lian didn’t want to hear. He cried out immediately, “No! It’s not false! Think: under your rule, weren’t there real changes?”

Lang Qianqiu closed his mouth, and the heaving of his chest faltered.

Xie Lian continued, “Didn’t you do really well? Didn’t the remnants of Xianle integrate peacefully with the people of Yong’an? There were fewer and fewer conflicts and riots, so how could any of it be false?”

There was a moment of silence. Tears rolled down Lang Qianqiu’s cheeks.

“But…but what about my royal parents? Yong’an and Xianle integrating was their greatest wish; that’s why they granted the princely title ‘An Le’ to the last of your royal bloodline. Their wish came true, but what of their end?”

Qi Rong clicked his tongue. “What a whiny crybaby, just like my saintly cousin was once upon a time! You came crying for your old man and old hag; I haven’t fucking harassed your ancestors for *my* old man and old hag! Integrating Yong’an and Xianle was their wish? What pretty words. An Le, An Le, settle first, joy after.[9] You think I can’t tell that it means you Yong’an dogs want to walk all over the heads of Xianle for the rest of our lives?”

Xie Lian yelled angrily, “Qi Rong, stop your madness!”

Lang Qianqiu, on the other hand, glowered at Qi Rong with tears still falling from his eyes.

“You’re the mastermind behind the massacre of my clan? And you’re part of the plot behind the Gilded Banquet too?”

Qi Rong snickered gleefully. “Yes, I’m part of it. An Le was part of it as well. And your shifu! We three people of Xianle all had our part. Ha ha ha ha ha…”

Unexpectedly, midway through his laugh, Lang Qianqiu’s greatsword swung down and struck. Qi Rong yelped and was sliced into two!

It was an exceedingly gory scene. Both halves of his body writhed and rolled around on the ground, and his upper half cried, “IT DOESN’T HURT! IT DOESN’T HURT! IT DOESN’T HURT ONE BIT! COMPARED TO THAT PUNCH FROM COUSIN CROWN PRINCE, YOU’RE NOTHING! HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

Lang Qianqiu didn’t say a word, just grabbed him by the head and picked that half up. Qi Rong was still spouting insults, but Xie Lian noticed something off in Lang Qianqiu’s expression.

He warned, “Qi Rong, stop talking if you value your life!”

Xie Lian always treated others with kindness and respect, but Qi Rong was not someone who could be faced normally. Xie Lian knew this truth profoundly. Every time he had to face Qi Rong, Xie Lian’s normal politeness disappeared, and he unconsciously started being rude himself.

Lang Qianqiu dragged Qi Rong’s upper body to the giant, boiling, bubbling cauldron.

“Do you usually use this cauldron to cook humans?”

As Qi Rong’s mangled carcass was dragged around, it painted a thick trail of blood on the ground. “Yeah, so?”

Without another word, Lang Qianqiu let go of his hold.

“AAAAAAAAH HA HA HA HA HA—”

It was hard to discern whether Qi Rong was screaming or laughing, and the moment he was dropped into that cauldron, his flesh instantly split and burst open from the scalding heat.

Xie Lian had not expected this development; his pupils shrank and he blurted, “Qianqiu!”

Lang Qianqiu responded sharply, “What? How many people has Green Ghost Qi Rong eaten? Why can’t I teach him what it feels like to be cooked? He’s the enemy that murdered my clan, am I not allowed to make him suffer?!”

Of course he could. Xie Lian couldn’t say anything, and he had no right to say anything either. Yet whether it was as the crown prince of a mortal kingdom or as Heaven’s Martial God of the East, Lang Qianqiu had never done something like this before. He had always been straightforward in fights, never cruel. These actions were far from the Lang Qianqiu that Xie Lian knew.

When Qi Rong was fished out of the boiling water, his body no longer retained a human shape. It instead resembled a melted lump of skin and flesh, bones poking out in some areas, terrifying to behold. Yet he still seemed quite pleased and was still guffawing.

“Congratulations, cousin! Look at your good disciple! His wings have hardened! He knows how to use torture now!”

Lang Qianqiu released his hold, and Qi Rong was once again submerged into the bubbling cauldron. This time when he was dropped, it seemed even his bones were dissolved by the boiling broth. Qi Rong didn’t float up again, and only the remnants of some green cloth emerged on the surface.

After a while, having still not seen his shadow, Xie Lian couldn’t help but call out, “Qi Rong!”

His younger cousin, once upon a time, couldn’t shut up about his cousin the crown prince, idolizing and praising him for everything he did. However, after the fall of Xianle, he turned into a complete madman. He led the burning of Xie Lian’s temples and the desecration of his palaces, and he commissioned the kneeling crown prince statues everywhere, affixing them as thresholds. To make Xie Lian suffer, he would do anything, at any cost. Xie Lian had done his best to put up with that behavior, and if it involved others, he did his best to obstruct it. Until finally, when he could no longer tolerate it, he had to stay away and practice the idea of “out of sight, out of mind.”

Afterward, they lost touch for many years, and Xie Lian thought that Qi Rong had passed away. Who knew that, after so long, he would suddenly meet this figure from his past and see that face that so resembled his own? He couldn't tell whether there were any feelings of nostalgia. The two of them were the only ones left from the royal house of Xianle, but they hadn't even been together for long before Qi Rong died before him—cruelly killed by Lang Qianqiu, who in the past would refuse to even so much as flog someone. So much happened in such a short period of time; Xie Lian hadn't yet sorted the thoughts in his head, and his heart was a mess. Lang Qianqiu stood next to the cauldron with his head hung low, unspeaking.

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up. "He's not dead."

Lang Qianqiu looked up at him.

Hua Cheng said, "You can't be thinking you've actually had your revenge? You only killed one of his many clones. If you want to exterminate him completely, you need to find his ashes."

"Thanks for reminding me," Lang Qianqiu said coldly. "I will definitely capture him with my own hands and use his ashes to pay my respects to my king father and queen mother. Once that's over, I will come and settle things with you, State Preceptor. Don't you dare think about running away again!"

As soon as he spoke, he gripped his greatsword and struck, slashing the cauldron, then turned abruptly to walk away. Boiling water spilled from the cauldron, and broth filled with slivers of bone poured onto the ground.

Xie Lian wanted to chase after him, but he knew that it wouldn't be of any use.

He halted, standing still, with nothing to say. Hua Cheng approached him.

"He just found out the truth, so it'd be better to leave him alone to cool down."

Xie Lian was completely stunned. "Why must he know the truth? Was the truth that important?"

"Very important," Hua Cheng replied. "He needed to know what you did and what you didn't do, and why you had to do it."

Xie Lian turned away and said coldly, “What’s the use of knowing everything so clearly? Would I be any more blameless if I killed fewer people? Would things be less hard?!”

Hua Cheng didn’t respond.

A blaze of anger flared from Xie Lian’s chest, and he didn’t even know who it was directed at. He blurted, “And what nonsense hardships have I experienced? His Majesty the king had wanted to integrate the two clans; did I not kill him? Prince An Le was the last of my family’s bloodline; did I not kill him? I deserve whatever comes to me—is it so wrong to count everything as my doing? What’s there to be afraid of? No matter what comes at me, I can’t die! I did this. I bring misfortune. And now Prince An Le is counted, Qi Rong is counted, everyone in Xianle is counted. Isn’t it better to hate one instead of a group? Must he think that everything I taught him was false, nothing more than empty bullshit?!”

Hua Cheng watched him quietly and didn’t argue. The two stared at each other, and suddenly Xie Lian covered his face with his hands.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, San Lang. I’ve gone mad. I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing. It’s my fault,” Hua Cheng said.

“No, it’s not your fault. This is my problem.” Xie Lian slumped to the ground, holding his head. “What a mess. What a disastrous mess.”

After a moment, Hua Cheng sat down next to him. “You weren’t wrong.”

Xie Lian kept holding his head and said nothing.

Hua Cheng continued, “The Yong’an king was killed to protect the remaining people of Xianle. Prince An Le was killed to prevent the two clans from fighting. In the end, in dying at the hands of Lang Qianqiu, the murderer faced justice. Three lives exchanged for centuries of peace, that’s worth it. If it were me, I would’ve done the same. Listen to me.”

His voice was full of conviction, leaving no room for doubt.

“You weren’t wrong. No one could’ve done it better than you.”

Xie Lian was quiet. After some time, he finally said, “I just don’t think it’s right.”

He slowly looked up.

“I just don’t think it’s right for someone to have been kind but still meet a bad end. I don’t think it should have ended up this way.

“Even if it was a lie, I wanted Qianqiu to remember that his benevolence toward Xianle was reciprocated. To believe that doing the right thing will open endless paths. Not like now, where he thinks everything I told him and everything he believed in was all false, lies, and deception. That everything was fucking nonsense! I just…”

He raised his right hand and stared at it.

“…I don’t want to see anyone go through what I’ve already had enough of.”

Hua Cheng listened quietly. Xie Lian felt self-conscious about the vulgar words he’d uttered and apologized again.

“I’m sorry. But look how absurd things are in this world. The first few generations of Yong’an rule were filled with violence and cruelty, but no one died tragically. But when it came to Lang Qianqiu’s parents, all they wanted was to do some good, to do something great, but it ended like this.”

The king of Yong’an honored him as the State Preceptor and treated him with the utmost respect for five years. Even at the end of his life, he passed on without any sign that that trust had dispersed. Xie Lian stared far into the distance, his eyes unfocused.

He whispered, “I just can’t forget…the look on his face when my sword pierced him.”

Hua Cheng said softly, “Forget about it. That was Qi Rong and Prince An Le’s fault.”

Xie Lian shook his head and buried it between his knees, his voice exhausted. “…Everything was going so well too.”

When Lang Qianqiu’s father ascended the throne, his very first decree was to break the culture of oppressing the people of Xianle. The people of Xianle and the people of Yong’an finally experienced peace between them for the first time; there were finally winds of change, finally signs of integration, finally hopes that they could leave the conflict behind.

And Prince An Le had to pick that time to paint the Gilded Banquet with blood.

That night when he escaped and found Prince An Le, he was originally going to warn him to never start trouble again. Yet after the last descendant of his royal house discovered his true identity, he excitedly grabbed hold of him and asked him to join his grand scheme of revenge and aid the recovery of their kingdom. His eyes were so red with passion and his voice so high with excitement that it made one’s hair stand on end. He first vowed to spill blood at the Gilded Banquet, then kill Lang Qianqiu, and then sow havoc in Yong’an. They would do this even at the cost of destroying the growing amity between the two peoples and at the cost of all the lives that remained from Xianle. As long as they could drag everyone of Yong’an, royalty and commoners alike, to the depths of hell, they would not hesitate.

But in the end, who was killed was killed, who was murdered was murdered. However just the reason, however compelling the reason, the truth was that he’d killed, with his own hands, an honorable king who had truly wanted to eradicate discrimination, as well as the last blood descendant of his clan in this world.

Chapter 23:
In the Cannibal’s Lair, Ghost King Faces Heavenly Officials

XIE LIAN TURNED HIS HEAD to look at that dejected-looking kneeling statue. “Qi Rong was right about one thing. I am quite the failure.”

“Don’t believe the words of useless trash like him,” Hua Cheng said quietly. “Other than being good at not dying and running away, he’s got nothing going for him. He couldn’t even level up to a supreme after eight hundred years. Even beating him up would only dirty your hands.”

Xie Lian’s lips jerked upwards with the thought: wasn’t he the same? Only good at not dying and running away; even after eight hundred years, he’d only gotten this far, which was nowhere.

When he first saw Lang Qianqiu as the Martial God of the East, a high-ranking heavenly official but still maintaining his old character—still straightforward, still falling asleep in boring meetings—he felt rather gratified. However, who knew how he would change from now on? He went off in pursuit of Qi Rong; once that was done, how would he end things with Xie Lian?

Xie Lian rose to his feet and slowly walked to the statue. He faced it head-on; that face was indeed exactly the same as his own, only it was carved with a sorrowful expression, its face covered in tears, contorted and scrunched up, extremely ugly. After staring at it for a moment, Xie Lian sighed and placed his hand on its head, pouring in a powerful pulse of energy.

When he removed his hand, two long crevices crawled over the cheeks of the statue, and soon after, the crying face broke apart. The statue collapsed and crumbled into innumerable small rocks and fell to the ground, never to be restored.

When Xie Lian turned around again, his usual gentle, serene expression had returned. He rubbed his forehead and said, “There are probably still humans hidden in Qi Rong’s lair. I’ll go find them and release them.”

Hua Cheng stood up too. “Let’s go.”

During the ruckus earlier, all the little green lantern ghosts in Qi Rong’s lair had fled, and those who hadn’t were hidden in the shadows, afraid to come out. The two searched all over, nabbing a couple of unfortunate little ghosts along the way and forcing them to guide them to the many caves used for “storing fresh food.” Counting roughly, the number of people Qi Rong had captured for consumption was—shockingly—no less than three hundred, all villagers living near or travelers passing by.

The two unlocked jail cells as they roamed, freeing all the detainees. With a task at hand, Xie Lian was able to focus on something else and calm down. And once they were free, he had the time to chat with Hua Cheng.

He pondered his words but asked anyway: “By the way, San Lang, I wanted to ask you about something.”

“What is it?” Hua Cheng replied.

“How did you know that Qi Rong was the mastermind behind the Gilded Banquet plot?” Xie Lian asked.

At first, he didn’t know why Hua Cheng had brought him and Lang Qianqiu to the Green Ghost’s lair, but now he understood Hua Cheng’s objective was to have Lang Qianqiu hear Qi Rong’s confession to the whole Gilded Banquet scheme for himself.

“Qi Rong didn’t know that I was Fangxin,” Xie Lian said. “If he had known, he would’ve harassed me from the start. At the time, although I knew the old Xianle royals were plotting something underhanded, I didn’t know that Qi Rong was behind it all. So how did you find out? How long have you known this?”

“Not too long.” Hua Cheng walked alongside him with his hands clasped behind his back. “I’ve run into Qi Rong a few times and quickly understood what sort of person he is. Qi Rong was of Xianle when he was alive and holds deep hatred for Yong’an. He is good at the art of provocation, fanning fires and fabricating situations. Many major assassination plots targeting Yong’an nobles were manipulated by him behind the scenes, but he hid himself well.”

Xie Lian shook his head. “So, he already had a history. Good thing he’s good at hiding; if the Upper Court found out he had a hand in all those mortal conflicts, they wouldn’t show him any mercy.”

“The Gilded Banquet Massacre was very much his style,” Hua Cheng said. “So I had always believed that he was the mastermind and the State Preceptor Fangxin was his lackey. But in the Upper Court, when Lang Qianqiu identified you as the State Preceptor Fangxin, it was clear there was no way Fangxin and Qi Rong could be on the same side.”

Xie Lian’s steps slowed. It seemed that even though Hua Cheng wasn’t present in the heavens, he was still very well informed on what went on in the Palace of Divine Might. And not just that, he was also very knowledgeable about Xie Lian’s personal relationship with Qi Rong.

Hua Cheng continued, “Nevertheless, I still leaned toward Qi Rong as the mastermind, or at least the one who started the whole thing. Ordinary Xianle descendants received tremendous improvements to their lives after Lang Qianqiu’s father ascended the throne, and they no longer thought of avenging their fallen kingdom like they had in the past. The only ones who couldn’t let go would be the royal family of Xianle. At the time, the sole remaining descendant was Prince An Le. If Qi Rong wanted to instigate anyone into starting anything, it would have been him. And very conveniently, the man in question randomly died of an unknown illness right after the Gilded Banquet. Obviously suspect, is it not?”

Xie Lian nodded, and Hua Cheng concluded.

“So he was most likely killed, and the reason for his death had something to do with the Gilded Banquet. My initial deduction was that it was the work of Yong’an nobility, but nothing happened to the descendants of Xianle, so it couldn’t have been them. I thought about it and came to my present conclusion.”

Xie Lian smiled and was amazed. “So few clues, and yet you deduced so accurately.”

“It’s not hard,” Hua Cheng said. “You just have to know the main people involved well.”

“That’s for sure, but in your deduction, there is a significant assumption that I don’t understand.”

“And that is?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Why were you so convinced that Qi Rong was the one who made the first move?”

“It’s not that I believed he did it. I just believed that *you* didn’t.”

Xie Lian’s smile faded at this. He was quiet for a moment before asking, “Why is that?”

“If you had admitted to the Gilded Banquet Massacre using any other reason, then I would’ve believed it was you,” Hua Cheng replied. “The Yong’an king was a diligent ruler, loved by the people, and yet Lang Qianqiu said the reason you told him was ‘I couldn’t stand seeing your people on the throne.’

“That was a model declaration for someone intent on overthrowing the crown. But if that declaration came from you, it’d be a poor attempt at tarnishing your name.”

Xie Lian puffed a soundless laugh at the mention. “‘Tarnishing my name’? You didn’t think that I might have harbored those thoughts deep down inside? Maybe I do have some resentment hidden.”

“Thoughts are thoughts. You wouldn’t have acted on them,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian shut his mouth. After a moment, he said, “San Lang, I’m not the person you think I am. You—”

Xie Lian closed his eyes and shook his head, as if unsure whether to continue.

Hua Cheng urged, “Tell me, it’s fine.”

Xie Lian chewed on his words but finally said, “I just think it’s best for people not to place too much hope on someone else.”

“Oh?” Hua Cheng hummed. “And what do you mean by that?”

“You shouldn’t idolize people or think of them as overly perfect,” Xie Lian replied. “If you’re just watching a shadow from afar and never interacting, then sure. But once acquainted and grown close, one day you’ll find that this person isn’t what you imagined, maybe even the complete opposite. When that happens, you’ll be very disappointed.”

Hua Cheng disagreed respectfully. “You never know. I don’t care if anyone else is disappointed. But to some, the very existence of a certain person in this world is in itself hope.”

Although he didn’t specify who “some” were, or who “a certain person” was, and though his tone was plain and casual like he was making an offhand comment, Xie Lian’s heart suddenly lifted, and he felt light.

He paused in his step and couldn’t speak for a long time. A moment later, he suddenly asked, “San Lang, who are you, really?”

Hua Cheng stopped too, and he turned his head to look at him.

Xie Lian looked him squarely in his eye and asked seriously, “You knew who Qi Rong was and his background. You knew who I was and how to paint the God-Pleasing Crown Prince. You seem to know everything about me. You know a lot. Maybe even more than you let on.”

Hua Cheng arched his brows. “Don’t I always know a lot?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “It’s not the same.”

His left hand held his right elbow while his right hand propped up his chin. He looked at Hua Cheng in wonder.

“I’ve always had the feeling that you’re someone from my past and that you must’ve known me from very early on. Maybe it was during my first ascension; no, maybe even earlier. Yet…I really don’t remember. When have I ever met a character like you?”

Someone like Hua Cheng would be unforgettable from the first meeting. Xie Lian had never bashed his head in and lost his memories, so if they had met, there was no reason he wouldn’t remember.

Xie Lian gazed at him, fixated and somewhat bemused. “Who are you exactly? Have I met you before?”

Hua Cheng didn’t answer, but his lips lifted softly. Xie Lian immediately returned to his senses and realized that his questions were extremely inappropriate.

A ghost’s real name was usually a secret. Not counting unfathomably abnormal cases like Qi Rong, a ghost usually wouldn’t tell it to anyone.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, “I’m sorry, don’t mind me. I was just asking. You don’t have to answer me. Who you are doesn’t matter.”

Just then, Hua Cheng’s eye squinted. Xie Lian sensed something as well and looked back. From nearby, in the caves behind them, came the sound of noisy chatter and the clear, loud voice of a woman.

“I told you, my powers are stronger in my female form, and even my luck is better! Yet you still wouldn’t let me. Do you see now? We rolled it right this time!!”

It was Shi Qingxuan’s voice.

Xie Lian blurted out, “Lord Wind Master!”

As he had guessed, a white-clad lady cultivator came sprinting out of a cave opening, and her eyes lit up when she saw Xie Lian.

“I found him! His Highness is here!”

However, she then saw Hua Cheng standing behind Xie Lian, and her face fell immediately. She leapt backwards and flashed the Wind Master fan before her. But before Xie Lian had the chance to say anything, a man’s voice echoed from within the cave.

“Did you find him? Is everything all right?”

The voice approached quickly, and soon another figure appeared—it was Feng Xin. He had a long, black bow in his left hand, and the moment he saw Hua Cheng, he pulled back the silver bowstring, on high alert. Hua Cheng sneered and made no comment.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, “Put away your weapons, we can talk this out.”

The four had run into each other on the narrow path of the Green Ghost’s lair, two against two. Feng Xin had his bowstring fully taut. A strand of spiritual light formed into the shape of an arrow within his right hand, and he aimed it at Hua Cheng.

Feng Xin spoke first, his voice full of warning. “Your Highness, come here.”

Feng Xin’s bow was gifted to him by Jun Wu; named Fengshen,[10] it was a rather troublesome spiritual device to face off against. Xie Lian was afraid he'd shoot for real, and he rushed to stand in front of Hua Cheng, shielding him. But unexpectedly, Hua Cheng grabbed him from behind and pulled him right back.

That pull startled the other two. Shi Qingxuan immediately raised his hand.

"Hua Cheng! Crimson Rain Sought Flower! D-d-d-don't do anything rash! The burning of your Paradise Manor was an accident! If you're upset, we can talk! The Heavens can pay you back. The Heavenly Emperor isn't that short on cash. Let go of His Highness, and we can talk."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but he was still immensely grateful. "Lord Wind Master, you're mistaken. Actually…"

He wanted to explain that Hua Cheng hadn't come looking for payback because of Paradise Manor, but Shi Qingxuan was throwing him guileful looks as if telling him not to speak a word. Hua Cheng didn't argue either, just raised his voice to speak.

"And what about Jun Wu setting up a spy under my nose? We have nothing to talk about."

Xie Lian finally understood. Shi Qingxuan could see that Hua Cheng had no ill intent, but on the surface, they had to pretend that Hua Cheng had only barged into the Heavens to collect his due. It would prevent gossip from those who might suggest that Xie Lian had maliciously and intentionally absconded. Hua Cheng understood Shi Qingxuan's intent and had played along. However, Xie Lian didn't want to go this route.

"All right, stop acting. He only came to the Heavens to save me. San Lang had good intentions, so why conceal them?"

"No more acting," Shi Qingxuan agreed. "I already sent those two exchanges to the communication array. You don't understand—no matter how good the intentions, words always end up negative once they've been passed around enough. They might as well be negative from the start."

"You get it," Hua Cheng commented.

"Of course! Otherwise, how could I, the Lord Wind Master, be so popular in the Heavens?" Shi Qingxuan preened. "General Nan Yang, lower your bow."

However, Feng Xin still had his bow pulled at almost full strength, holding his breath and not saying a word. Shi Qingxuan smacked him.

“Put it down, can’t you see they’re close? Nothing bad’s gonna happen.”

Feng Xin said in a dark voice, “Your Highness, the one next to you is a supreme…”

Seeing that he wouldn’t drop his hostility, nor his bow, Shi Qingxuan suddenly threw herself into his arm.

Instantly, Feng Xin’s face paled, worse than if he’d seen a ghost by a million-fold. He screamed, and the shaft of the spiritual arrow dissipated powerlessly like a cloud. Face aghast, he opened his mouth, and a long string of loud curses came out, ending with a distressed cry.

“What the fuck?! What are you doing?!”

Turned out, Shi Qingxuan had used her bosoms to ram into the arm holding the arrow. By the looks of it, that blow had thoroughly terrified Feng Xin. Shi Qingxuan swung her whisk back, elegantly carefree, looking as if she hadn’t just done anything indecent.

“I haven’t even asked you what *you* are doing. I just said that Crimson Rain Sought Flower came to save His Highness, and you still point at him with your arrow. If you want to fight him so badly, well, I won’t help you.”

Feng Xin had already backed a million miles away and looked like he would never approach her again. He cried out in dismay, “Don’t you dare do that ever again! Ever!! Do you hear me?!”

Watching him avoid her as if she were a snake, Shi Qingxuan, who was so confident about her ethereal beauty, actually felt rather depressed.

“Okay, okay, okay. I won’t do it again. It’s not like you suffered any loss, so what’s with that reaction?” As if feeling she’d lost face, Shi Qingxuan changed back into a man and turned around. “Eh? Where’s Qianqiu?”

At his words, Feng Xin finally collected himself somewhat and looked around too.

Xie Lian *ah*’d and asked, “He’s not in the communication array?”

“No?” Shi Qingxuan answered. “After he rolled the dice and left, we didn’t hear a peep. I asked him multiple times what the correct roll was, but he never replied. Before, when I talked to Qianqiu, he’d always respond really fast—not just to me but to any officials regardless of their rank. So weird.”

Xie Lian let out a soft sigh. “His Highness Tai Hua has left to chase after Qi Rong.”

The other two were taken aback. “Qi Rong?”

“Yeah. This place is Qi Rong’s lair.” Xie Lian sighed, “In any case…”

Feng Xin cut in, “Wait. Why is His Highness Tai Hua pursuing Qi Rong? Didn’t he come chasing after you?”

“No reason,” Hua Cheng answered from behind. “He’s simply chasing the true culprit behind the Gilded Banquet Massacre. The only thing His Highness did was clean up the mess that murderer left. Lang Qianqiu found out the truth and went chasing after the real culprit. That’s all.”

Feng Xin was shocked. “The real culprit? Is this true?!”

Xie Lian didn’t think he could explain it all again, and he certainly couldn’t explain the complex details clearly in a rush anyway, so he just shook his head. “It’s not that simple. I’ll explain more when we get back.”

Shi Qingxuan, although ignorant of the full story, was joyous. “I knew there was a misunderstanding in all this! I’ve got such godly premonition! Now, even if you return, you won’t be detained!”

“Good!” Feng Xin said too, looking greatly relieved.

He put away his bow, and the wariness he had shown also significantly decreased. Hua Cheng, on the other hand, only snorted coldly.

“Did you know?” Xie Lian asked Feng Xin. “That Qi Rong is *that* Qi Rong?”

Feng Xin asked, “Which Qi Rong? Who?” Then he gave a startle. “The one we knew?”

“So you didn’t realize it was him either?” Xie Lian remarked.

Feng Xin’s face went dark. “No. I’ve never run into the Green Ghost himself and had always assumed the name was just a coincidence. What kind of dumbass would run around flaunting his real name? That’s crazy!”

But the moment the words left his mouth, he instantly remembered that Qi Rong was indeed crazy. His eyes met Xie Lian’s, and both fell silent in mutual understanding.

Since long before the two ascended, Feng Xin had despised Qi Rong. Qi Rong was the son of the younger sister of Xie Lian’s mother, the last queen of Xianle. He grew up in the royal palace and spent his days clinging to Xie Lian, and as Xie Lian’s personal guard, Feng Xin of course saw Qi Rong frequently. Qi Rong was young, immature, bullheaded, energetic, extreme, and worst of all, royalty. Thus, no one dared to educate or discipline him, and it was easy to imagine just how lawless he became.

The words that always used to hang upon his lips were “My cousin the crown prince is perfect!” “My cousin something something.” If anyone was even remotely disrespectful to Xie Lian, or gave him a sliver of a problem, it didn’t matter who it was, Qi Rong would surely bag that person with a sack and beat them until they shat themself. In his mind, there was never any care or respect for the old or young. There was even an incident where Xie Lian saved a child not even ten years of age from Qi Rong’s clutches; the poor boy had been beaten to a bloody pulp, miserable to the bone. Yet Xie Lian was sympathetic to Qi Rong’s circumstances, plus he was genuinely on Xie Lian’s side, so even Xie Lian never disciplined him physically. But if it was only lectures awaiting him, Qi Rong wouldn’t change no matter how many times he was scolded. He was truly a headache.

Feng Xin was a much more straightforward person, abrasive in his speech and not as patient as Xie Lian. Thus, he was constantly in dispute with Qi Rong or disobeying his commands. Because of that, Qi Rong also despised him and would always come up with new ways to get him in trouble, such as ordering him to run unreasonable errands. After Xie Lian ascended, Qi Rong became even more preposterous. For example, if anyone spat before the Palace of the Crown Prince, he would try to force burning hot coal down their throat. Feng Xin had to descend frequently to clean up after him and prevent him from going too far. Truly aggravating!

He'd always tell Xie Lian, "Qi Rong is ill in the head, and he's gonna incite chaos one day!"

"If that's really him, then it's no surprise that he did it," Feng Xin said.

Shi Qingxuan was curious. "What, do you all know the Green Ghost?!"

Xie Lian nodded. "He's my little cousin."

Shi Qingxuan was shocked and crossed his arms. "Well, ain't that something else."

"He is definitely something else," Xie Lian agreed.

"I'm not talking about him," Shi Qingxuan said. "I'm talking about you! Your Highness, look at you: the martial gods of the southeast and southwest are both your old buddies, the Martial God of the East is your disciple, that Night-Touring Green Lantern is your little cousin, Crimson Rain Sought Flower is your sworn brother, and I, Lord Wind Master, am your friend. Ain't that something?"

Xie Lian smiled, thinking that the Wind Master certainly had a breezy character befitting his title; the moment the wind blew, all the gloomy clouds dispersed. However, when Hua Cheng and Feng Xin heard "Crimson Rain Sought Flower is your sworn brother," both looked like they disagreed. Hua Cheng raised his brows, and Feng Xin knitted his.

After a moment, Feng Xin turned to Xie Lian. "If there's nothing else, you'd better hurry back to the Heavenly Court. Many of the heavenly officials have no idea what happened in that ruckus, and they're still waiting for news above. Jun Wu should have been informed by now. You need to report back and give them a proper account."

Hua Cheng laughed out loud at his words.

"What're you laughing at?" Feng Xin demanded.

"And here I was marveling at how straightforward you are, but it turns out you like to beat around the bush too," Hua Cheng said. "You just don't want His Highness to associate with the likes of demons and ghosts like me, so why not say so openly? Think it's not your place?"

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly. "San Lang…"

"As long as you're aware that he shouldn't be associating with the likes of demons and ghosts," Feng Xin said coldly.

Hua Cheng made no indication that he agreed or disagreed with that sentiment, and Xie Lian intercepted, responding to Feng Xin quietly.

"I will report in and give a proper account, but right now there are more important things at hand. Qi Rong had over three hundred humans hidden in his lair to feed upon. Thanks to San Lang's help, they were all saved. There are currently a number of little ghosts left that still need to be taken care of. I will return to the heavens as soon as that's done."

"It won't be good to take too long. Let me deal with this," Feng Xin said.

Hua Cheng nodded. "Judging by heaven's standards of efficiency, you'll probably finish handling it by next month."

"You say that as if you can handle it in an instant," Feng Xin said.

The two clashed measure for measure. Shi Qingxuan used his eyes to ask Xie Lian: Did something happen between the two of them? But Xie Lian only shook his head. He was about to change the subject when Hua Cheng took out an umbrella from who knows where. The umbrella was crimson red like maple leaves, vivid like fire. Hua Cheng raised it with one hand and covered himself and Xie Lian, reflecting a blushing red on their cheeks.

This had to be the same umbrella that Hua Cheng used to shield them through the hanging corpse forest at Mount Yujun. However, it wasn't raining at the moment, so Xie Lian was curious.

"San Lang, why did you open an umbrella?"

Hua Cheng looked at him and shifted the umbrella more to Xie Lian's side, smiling cheerfully. "Just wait. The sky's about to change."

As soon as he spoke, it poured from the sky! The rain thundered down, flecking and flacking. It came so suddenly, Xie Lian was dumbfounded. However, he was properly covered under Hua Cheng's umbrella, and not a single drop hit him.

Feng Xin was standing on the other side of the cave, however, and had not prepared at all. He was drenched head to toe by this rain. And the worst thing was, this rain was the color of blood.

Looking over, Feng Xin was now covered in blood and dripping; only his wide, bulging eyes were white, the rest of him red. Shi Qingxuan was conveniently standing in the interior of another cave so he wasn't affected, but his eyes were also wide with shock; he even forgot to wave his whisk.

That pouring rain came suddenly and left equally suddenly, and soon enough, everything was quiet once more. It took Feng Xin some time to recover. He wiped at his face, but it was still smeared with red, his attempt useless.

"Wha…" Xie Lian's mouth was agape.

Hua Cheng closed the umbrella and laughed. "An instant. How's that?"

In the span of those four short words, he'd already taken a number of leisurely steps and was quite a distance away. Xie Lian was fumbling all through his sleeves looking for some rags, but instead, Shi Qingxuan plucked some white strands from his whisk and handed them to the deeply silent Feng Xin. The moment Hua Cheng left, Xie Lian immediately sensed the void behind him and turned around in a rush, running a few steps after him.

"San Lang, are you going back to Ghost City?"

Hua Cheng turned his head. "Aren't you going back to the Heavenly Court?" He then added, half-jokingly, "But if you want to follow me back to Ghost City, you're very welcome to."

Xie Lian chuckled. "Next time," he said sincerely. "Next time, if there's a chance, I'll definitely visit Ghost City again. I'll help you lay bricks when you rebuild Paradise Manor."

"No need to lay bricks. Just sitting there and watching would be fine," Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian's smile died a little. "This thing with Qianqiu—despite how it went down, I should still thank you." He paused, then continued, "I don't know what the right thing to do was, so maybe this wasn't such a bad outcome."

“You think too much,” Hua Cheng said lightly.

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback and tilted his head.

“Just focus on doing what you want to do,” Hua Cheng said.

After that, he turned around and waved his hand.

Soon after, from within the mountains and under the moonlight, that crimson silhouette slowly disappeared from Xie Lian’s sight.

Chapter 24:
In Search of the Past, Retracing Steps to Mount Taicang

FOR SOME REASON, Xie Lian was suddenly filled with courage again.

After Lang Qianqiu had left, Xie Lian's steps had been hesitant, his shoulders slumped. But this courage came from nowhere, and it was hard to say where it would go; all Xie Lian knew was that it made him stand tall once more. He stood unmoving, and Shi Qingxuan approached, giving him a small pat on the back.

"What a guy. Your Highness, I don't know how you managed to befriend him, but you're very lucky."

It was rare for Xie Lian to hear someone tell him he was lucky. He glanced at Shi Qingxuan and smiled.

"Really? Maybe. I think so too."

Behind them, Feng Xin continued to wipe his face wordlessly. When the two turned their heads, they saw his face covered in white strands, miserable and unkempt, and they had to work to hold back their laughter.

"Sorry about that," Xie Lian said.

That counted as an apology on Hua Cheng's behalf. Feng Xin finally picked off all the white strands from his face.

"I'm not as skilled as him, so there's nothing to say."

The three of them then conducted a final sweep of all the caves, double-checking to make sure there were indeed no more humans or anything else left behind, before riding a draft of wind back to the Heavenly Court.

Once they passed the gates, they saw that the streets were filled with crowds of junior officials from the Middle Court, moving about, checking every nook and cranny of every palace as if they were about to face a grave enemy. When they finally arrived at the Palace of Divine Might, the main hall was already filled with heavenly officials of the Upper Court, and even from afar they could hear them arguing. The first thing they heard was:

“Hua Cheng dares accuse the Upper Court of the Heavens of sending a spy, how ludicrous! Why would the Heavenly Realm need to send a spy?”

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan cleared their throats lightly when they heard. Sending a spy was most likely the truth. Nothing had been settled yet, and the officials already couldn’t wait to start blathering. If the accusation was indeed true, wouldn’t they be putting their foot in their mouth?

The three entered the hall with Shi Qingxuan in the lead. When the crowd saw him, they greeted, “The Lord Wind Master has returned!” “Thanks for your hard work!” But all eyes were on Xie Lian. They were about to press for more but saw Feng Xin emerging from behind them, looking like he had crawled out of a bloody pond, his face dark. Everyone was frozen to the spot and immediately turned their eyes away. After all, no one wanted to be loudly cursed out in the great hall. Only Mu Qing held his gaze. He not only didn’t care to avoid him, but he purposely stared, his intent more than obvious.

Xie Lian raised his eyes and saw Jun Wu seated above on his throne. With a hand propping up his head and fingers pressed against his temple, his eyes were closed and he looked exhausted. Xie Lian could understand exactly how he felt.

In the past, there might not have been any conferences or meetings of this sort for months at a time. But with all the incidents that had happened recently, the Palace of Divine Might was filled to the brim time and time again; it was as if there was a situation every day, and they’d have to convene twice for each. If Xie Lian were in his shoes, he’d be tired too. Besides, there were many that wanted to have their voices heard, and they babbled away.

One of the officials exclaimed, “He came and went as he willed. Scary to think he was able to connect the Palace of Xianle to somewhere else. Now that he showed he can easily kidnap His Highness who offended him, who knows if he’ll kidnap any other heavenly officials. We can’t possibly let this go! We need to stop him right now!”

If this were the Mortal Realm, it would be akin to a rebel digging a tunnel beneath the royal palace and sneaking about freely. Of course people were uneasy. No wonder the Middle Court officials were busy searching and safeguarding the grounds. Mu Qing, on the other hand, had something else to say.

He said coolly, “Hua Cheng has so many devotees, and he lords over Ghost City. Something minuscule like burning his Paradise Manor would be nothing to him. He might not have broken into the Heavens just because His Highness offended him.”

Shi Qingxuan immediately countered, “General Xuan Zhen, you’re mistaken. Everyone heard Hua Cheng admit it himself. Speaking of, which general is responsible for security this month? Isn’t it a dereliction of duty that the Palace of Xianle had the connection spell cast upon it without that general even noticing?”

Pei Ming had been standing quietly on the side, unperturbed and with his arms crossed. When he heard Shi Qingxuan, he spoke up. “Me.”

Shi Qingxuan had accidentally remembered wrong and thought it was Mu Qing on duty, but he’d ended up calling out Pei Ming, and now things were somewhat awkward. However, Pei Ming didn’t push off the blame.

“I’m on duty this month. This is my oversight.”

A heavenly official who was on good terms with Pei Ming immediately tried to help him out of the predicament. “If you ask me, we should just look at these matters one case at a time. Let’s first clear up the issue in regards to the Gilded Banquet Massacre.”

Just then, Ling Wen, who was positioned next to the throne, suddenly spoke up. “We’ve news from His Highness Tai Hua.”

Jun Wu finally opened his eyes. “What did he say?”

Ling Wen was quiet for a moment, then she replied, “He states that there’s another side to the story of the Gilded Banquet Massacre. He will resolve the conflict with His Highness himself, and there’s no need for anyone else to interfere. Also, that His Highness’s request for banishment must not go through. Those are the two things.”

“What other side?” Mu Qing frowned.

“He didn’t say anything more. That is all,” Ling Wen replied.

To think they would see a battle erupt and a hammer come down heavily, only to have it land as lightly as a feather; the heavenly officials couldn’t help but feel rather disappointed. Lang Qianqiu was the plaintiff, and the plaintiff was no longer accusing the defendant, so what fun was there to be had watching? Besides, Lang Qianqiu wasn’t telling, and Xie Lian didn’t look like he was going to say anything either, so there was nothing more to chew on in this matter.

Following Ling Wen’s report, Jun Wu appointed Feng Xin and Mu Qing to assist Pei Ming in strengthening security and settled a few other matters before waving his hand and dismissing everyone. Xie Lian stayed behind, and he could hear the faint conversations passing by.

“I knew it. Whenever he stirs up anything, the Emperor says he’ll interrogate him, but in the end nothing comes of it…”

“We’ve been blind—he’s actually someone significant. Gotta watch what we say from now on.”

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Once everyone left, Xie Lian approached the throne and bowed.

“I’ve caused My Lord problems.”

“This does not count as a problem just yet. The real problem was you stubbornly proclaiming yourself the only one responsible for the Gilded Banquet Massacre.”

Xie Lian was hesitant, but in the end still gave an account of the whole story.

After listening to the story, Jun Wu commented, “Xianle, in regards to your methods in managing this matter, you worked hard for nothing and pleased no one.”

Xie Lian hung his head. “I know.”

“Never mind. You are always like this,” Jun Wu said. “Tai Hua has now changed focus to pursue the Green Ghost. Once he succeeds, he will certainly return for you. Have you thought on how you will face him?”

“Not yet. But let’s focus on something else,” Xie Lian replied.

Jun Wu chuckled. “Such as? Is it something interesting that can amuse me?”

“Was it My Lord who sent the Earth Master to Ghost City as a spy?” Xie Lian asked.

“Yes,” Jun Wu answered leisurely.

“Why?”

Jun Wu answered slowly, “Because it was Hua Cheng who planted a spy in the Heavenly Realm first.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. Jun Wu stood.

“For many years, news has reached Hua Cheng’s ears too quickly. There were many things he should not have known and instead knew too well. As for what can be done and what cannot be done, where the line is and how to cross said line, he is overly perceptive and precise. That he could connect directly to your Palace of Xianle only proves that he does indeed have a spy here in the Heavenly Realm, otherwise it could not have been done.”

To be honest, Xie Lian had noticed this too. After all, Hua Cheng really did know way too much; hearing Jun Wu say it out loud, it wasn’t hard to believe.

“Does My Lord have any evidence?” Xie Lian inquired.

Jun Wu shook his head slowly. “It is because there was no proof, but things were suspicious regardless, that I sent Ming Yi to the Ghost Realm. It was unexpected that Ming Yi fell into his hands before the spy was found. Although you saved him from Hua Cheng’s grasp, now it will be even more difficult to find that spy.”

“Is it the Upper Court or the Middle Court that’s the problem?” Xie Lian asked.

“Hard to say,” Jun Wu said. “Aside from you, it might be anyone. Perhaps there is only one mole. Perhaps more.”

No wonder Jun Wu didn’t appoint anyone else to investigate Ming Yi’s disappearance. If it could be anyone besides him, Xie Lian couldn’t help but think: *Even the Wind Master, Qianqiu, Feng Xin—everyone is a possible agent?*

Just then, Jun Wu spoke. “Xianle, I know you think highly of Hua Cheng right now. You understand your own position, and others should not comment on the friends you make. However, when necessary, be wary of Hua Cheng. Do not give anything away.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian schooled his thoughts.

Jun Wu continued, “To become a supreme, one must have experienced unimaginable suffering and pain. One either ascends from such tribulations or is doomed to the depths of hell, never to return. The two Supreme Ghost Kings that emerged from Mount Tonglu, Black Water and Hua Cheng, are both far more frightening than you think.”

Xie Lian lowered his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Jun Wu said, “I do not know what his objectives or directives are, but he knows the motives and movements of the Upper Court. That in itself is disadvantageous.”

When he heard the word “disadvantageous,” Xie Lian raised his head and blurted, “San Lang, he…”

Seeing that Jun Wu turned his head to him, Xie Lian paused, then corrected himself.

“Hua Cheng shouldn’t do anything overly malicious. If My Lord thinks about it, with his strength, should he have wanted to cause havoc and raise hell, he would’ve done so already. If he didn’t before, then without real reason, he won’t in the future.”

“Pray that it will be so,” Jun Wu said. “But you know I cannot take that risk.”

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After leaving the Palace of Divine Might, Xie Lian paced slowly down the streets of the Heavenly Court. When he passed by the Palace of Xianle, he stopped to appraise it.

This was the palace gifted him by Jun Wu; resplendent, brand new, but also foreign. The large, scarlet-red doors were shiny and bright but were plastered with nailed-on talismans and charms, forming a giant “X” and cautioning anyone who should see.

When Shi Qingxuan left the Palace of Divine Might, he had told Xie Lian that his palace was currently sealed shut since it was connected to elsewhere, so Xie Lian was welcome to rest at his palace instead. However, after staring at this Palace of Xianle for a while, Xie Lian suddenly turned on his heel. He didn’t go to the Palace of the Wind Master either. He stopped caring what he was originally going to do and instead headed straight to the Ascension Gates and jumped.

Passing through the sea of clouds, his landing point was Mount Taicang.

Upon the summit of Mount Taicang, there used to sit the cultivation center of the ancient Kingdom of Xianle: the Royal Holy Temple.

The Royal Holy Temple was an impressively expansive cultivation center. Its training grounds and temples covered the entirety of Mount Taicang, worshipping innumerous gods and immortals alike, scintillating and glorious. The main god worshipped was the Heavenly Emperor, and his golden temple was situated on the highest peak. The Crown Prince Temple that once stood on the second-highest peak was also a place of magnificent splendor.

Eight hundred years ago, Mount Taicang was renowned for its forests of flaming-red maples, and within those maple groves were endless crowds of devotees. However, when the Kingdom of Xianle fell, the crowds of devotees became crowds of angry rioters. They scaled the mountain to set ablaze the Crown Prince Temple, but they ended up setting fire to the entirety of Mount Taicang, burning it down to nothing but blackened earth and ash.

The burnt earth, like ground nourished by the dead, seemed to become even more fertile. Afterward, new seeds were planted upon the burnt earth, and new trees emerged. A few hundred years later, the mountain was fresh and covered once more, but the red leaves were no longer. The scenery was very different from eight hundred years ago.

When hiking the mountain in the past, there used to be a wide, paved path bordered by greenery. On the path, one could often see a devotee or a young trainee hauling firewood or water. Now, this path was long gone.

Rocks and debris, withered branches and sticks, had covered its tracks and buried it deep underground. As Xie Lian climbed, he used only the strength of his legs, and when he ran into thorns or bushes, he took Fangxin and cut them down.

When he reached halfway up the mountain, Xie Lian was fatigued and leaned against a dead tree, ready to rest. Suddenly, the black shadow of an object came crashing down from the branches, making odd crackling sounds as it rushed toward him.

Xie Lian dodged. At first, he thought it was a broken branch or a nest, but when he looked closer, it was a plank so rotten that its original shape was indiscernible, with two rusted steel chains connected to either side. If it were anyone else, they might not be able to tell what it was, but Xie Lian knew immediately that it was a swing.

In the past, Mount Taicang had swings installed everywhere, both for fun and for training. Back when Xie Lian had only just started to retain memories, he once accompanied his parents to visit the Royal Holy Temple to pray for blessings. He saw a group of young trainees sparring, flipping and flopping all over the swings. It was an exciting performance; the king and queen enjoyed it, and Xie Lian clapped and shouted his appreciation. The king and queen were so pleased that they richly rewarded the young trainees, and ever since then the impression was left deep in Xie Lian’s heart that cultivation was something awesome and fun.

Though when he formally entered the sect for cultivation in his later years, the reason was no longer because it seemed fun.

After some rest, Xie Lian continued hiking. The higher he climbed, the thicker the bushes became, and every so often a critter would dart by, leaving behind a shadow of a bushy tail. There were a few squirrels huddling in the trees, munching on pinecones, peeking at this uninvited guest.

Thorns blocked his path, tearing at his clothes and limbs, but Xie Lian didn’t mind at all. Six hours later, at last he reached the peak of the Crown Prince Summit.

Of course, the Crown Prince Summit wasn’t originally called the Crown Prince Summit, but the name was changed after the Crown Prince Temple was constructed. Amidst the bushes and weeds, there were still remnants of pebble-paved grounds here and there; these were hidden traces of the large, burned foundation of the temple’s great hall. Going across it, through the rubble and ruins, past tinted glass tiles, he reached a chipped old well.

Looking from above into its bottom, it was easy to tell the old well had long dried up; the distance to the bottom was only a little over a meter, and all that was visible was sludge. Without hesitation, Xie Lian pulled his legs over the side and jumped in.

He didn’t tumble into sludge but instead traversed through that illusion and descended for over a dozen meters before his feet touched solid ground.

The surroundings were so dark that if he were to raise his hand, his fingers wouldn’t be visible. He looked up; there was no sunlight either, as if a heavy piece of fabric had blocked it out. Xie Lian felt around the bottom of the well, feeling several bricks, and pressed them in a certain order. With a rumbling noise, a small, short door opened on the side. Xie Lian dropped down on all fours and slowly crawled through the path past the small door. The moment he entered, he could hear another rumbling noise behind, sealing off the opening.

After half an incense time, he had finally crawled to the end of the tunnel. Xie Lian straightened up, snapped his fingers, and held up a small flickering flame.

After that small ball of flame was ignited, as if in response, not far in the distance another faint light started to glow like a pearl as it woke from its deep slumber and blinked open its bright eyes.

Soon after, more and more pearls glowed, connecting throughout and illuminating the surroundings. It became clearer and clearer that it was the spacious great hall of an underground palace. Above the great hall, there were embedded thousands of sparkling stars.

It was hard to imagine that the Imperial Mausoleum of the ancient Kingdom of Xianle was hidden beneath the scorched earth of Mount Taicang. Those brilliant stars were night pearls[11] and diamonds embedded in the ceiling; the night pearls glowed when they came in contact with light, and the diamonds reflected their radiance. When they crossed paths, the result was a bedazzling brilliance, like a dream. It was like a minuscule Milky Way hidden below ground.

Each night pearl and diamond was priceless; each jewel was worth an entire lifetime of riches. However, Xie Lian didn’t spare them a glance, just walked directly through the great hall, entering the crypt at the very back.

In comparison to the great hall, this tomb was exceedingly simple, as the chamber wasn’t fully completed. There was no resplendent decor, only two coffins. Between the coffins stood a person dressed in extravagant clothing. There was a golden mask on its face, and a sword extended, the blade sharp and dazzling, pointed at him.

However, this person remained frozen in that stance and didn’t make any movement. Xie Lian idly approached without a single care. This was because Xie Lian knew that behind the golden mask there was no face, and under the exquisite dress there was no person. The only thing standing there was an empty stack of dried hay, held together by bundles of sticks.

For so long, only this set of elegant dress robes and this mask had stood by the sides of those two solitary coffins in his stead. On top of each coffin was a small golden plate, but the things in those plates contrasted their elegance: fruits of some sort, dried and shriveled to the core, and some unknown hard blocks that were rotten and blackened. After Xie Lian entered the chamber, he cleared out those things and tossed them into a corner of the crypt. He felt around his sleeves and clothing folds. Originally, he’d had a half-eaten bun on him, but that bun was given to Hua Cheng, so now he had nothing.

Thus, he said, “Father, Mother, I apologize. I’ve forgotten to bring something for this visit.”

Naturally, no one answered him. Xie Lian slowly sat down and leaned against one of the coffins.

After zoning out for some time, he finally spoke again.

“Mother, I saw Qi Rong.

“Qi Rong didn’t die, he turned into a ghost. I really don’t know how he’s lived these past hundreds of years.”

Xie Lian shook his head.

“He…killed a lot of people, and now there are people trying to kill him. The Upper Court probably won’t forgive him either.” Xie Lian sighed. “I really don’t know what to do with him.”

He was going to say more when suddenly, from someplace extremely close, there came the sound of soft weeping.

Xie Lian froze, and his expression changed drastically.

He listened closely; it wasn’t a hallucination. It really was the sound of crying. The voice was very low, very small, and would’ve been easily missed if he didn’t hold his breath and pay close attention. The sound was also soft, and if it wasn’t a child, it had to be a woman.

The crying was very close; it was as if they were only separated by a thin wall, the sound clinging close to him. Xie Lian whipped his head around and at last confirmed—the sound came from the coffin he was leaning on!

Amidst his shock, the first words that came blurting out were unconsciously joyous.

“Mother, is that you?!”

However, Xie Lian snapped out of it immediately, knowing that what he had desperately hoped for would never come true. His mother had passed eight hundred years ago, relieved of her suffering, and she had never devolved into a grudging ghost. The emotion behind those cries was also not of sorrow but of fright.

In this time and place, who in the world would be hiding in his mother’s coffin and weeping?!

Xie Lian couldn’t wait for another second, and he threw open the cover of the coffin with his left hand, his right on Fangxin, ready to strike. But the moment he saw what was inside, the striking sword stopped abruptly in its path.

Lying inside the coffin, alone, was the form of a person covered in elegant, black attire, with their head wrapped in a face cover.

The only person who this should’ve been was his mother, but the one lying in the casket was most definitely not her. The form was small and short, the body type completely different, and most significantly, this person was trembling—it was a real, live person!

Xie Lian ripped off the face cover. Sure enough, beneath the fabric was the face of a young child! His heart froze at that moment. He grabbed the child and lifted him, his voice shocked and panicked.

“Where’s my mother? Where’s my mother?! What did you do to my mother’s body?!”

Although that elegant black dress didn’t look like anything out of the ordinary, it was in fact woven from the silk of an extremely rare worm. The silk was a tribute from a small foreign nation, and weaving it into clothing took intricate craftsmanship. Interwoven with fragrant herbal satchels and sealed into the coffin, the cadaver would remain preserved for thousands of years, allowing the dead to look like she was still among the living. However, at that moment, the one wearing that black silk dress was this child, so where did the body of his mother go? What condition would it be in now?

Xie Lian didn’t dare to think deeply on it and could only demand answers from this unknown child in his hold.

He questioned once more, sternly, “Where’s my mother? Who are you? Why are you here? What did you do with my mother’s body?!”

But how could a child terrified to tears answer any of his questions? He was too scared to even speak. Xie Lian dragged him out of the coffin and realized suddenly that some ashen white powder had been shaken out of the black dress with that movement.

Face white as a sheet, he looked into the coffin and found that the bottom of the casket was also covered with a thin layer of powder. The world spun, and Xie Lian felt his heart stop. His grip loosened, letting the child go, and he fell to his knees before the coffin, his mind blank.

He didn’t dare to touch that powder with his hands, but he couldn’t just let it sit and sift either, like incense ashes flying in the wind. Although in denial, he knew deep within what that was.

Once the silk funeral garb was forcibly removed, what else could a sealed cadaver of eight hundred years become?

Instantly, Xie Lian's mind fell into chaos, unable to think; he held his head with his hands and there was ringing in his ears. Just then, his back tensed as his instincts sensed danger behind; he whipped his head around, and with a hand fast like lightning, he seized the blade of a sword barehanded. Someone had tried to stab him from behind—it was that stack of bundled hay!

It turned out that someone had long since snuck in. They had dressed themself in that exquisite attire, put on the mask, and disguised themself as a lifeless haystack to wait for him silently.

A loud clang rang in the air, and Xie Lian broke the blade in two with his bare hands, face unchanging even with blood pooling in his palms. As fast as lightning, he raised his leg and kicked that person in the abdomen, stomping them firmly into the ground. With their chest solidly pinned, that person grabbed at his boot and struggled, but they were unable to move an inch, as if they were nailed to the ground. Xie Lian bent over and slapped away the golden mask with one hand, revealing the face of a young man.

Xie Lian shouted, "Who are you?! A grave robber?! How did you get in?!"

Just then, the child to the side cried, "Daddy!"

This cry finally made Xie Lian remember. This man and child looked familiar—weren't they that pair he saved from being cooked and eaten by Qi Rong back at the Green Ghost's lair?!

Xie Lian understood the situation instantaneously. He swung a punch like striking thunder at the man's jaw, roaring, "Qi Rong, get the hell out! I'm going to kill you!!"

The man laughed as he spat blood. "Cousin Crown Prince! What a joyous occasion! We meet again! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Although the face was different, who else but Qi Rong could this insane psychotic laughter belong to? When he lost his physical form, he possessed this young father!

No need for further explanation, but after his material body was thrown into that cauldron by Lang Qianqiu and melted away, he must've used the chaos of everyone running for their lives to possess the young man to avoid being pursued and then came to the Imperial Mausoleum of Xianle.

Otherwise, how could a commoner know of the secret tomb of Xianle royalty? And how could they have found it in such a short time?

That child he dragged along may have been intended as rations for travel, or maybe the intent was to hide him in the coffin to divert Xie Lian's attention for his ambush. Xie Lian punched him again, and Qi Rong held his face, looking aggrieved.

"Cousin, why are you so mad? It's not like you'd die from a stab wound, hee hee hee hee!"

Thud, thud! Xie Lian punched him twice more, his eyes red around the rims.

"How did my mother always treat you?! And yet you treat her like this?! How could you, to her body—?!"

Qi Rong humphed. "Yimu[12] is long dead. The person is no more, so what difference does it make if she's a corpse or ashes? The corpse only changed form, isn't it still there? Here you are, leaking tears and snot, weren't you much tougher when you killed An Le? Can't believe my good cousin actually has two faces, hee hee!" He then changed his face and spat. "How could I treat her like this? You're the one to blame! Don't you even know how to reflect on yourself? This is all your fault! You, God of Misfortune, have the gall to come cry at the Imperial Mausoleum of Xianle?!"

Xie Lian stomped down harder, and Qi Rong screamed, spewing blood from his mouth. But he looked even more excited and used both his hands to cling on firmly to the now blood-soaked white boot while he howled.

"THAT'S RIGHT! THAT'S RIGHT! JUST LIKE THIS! This is more like you! Fight, fight, kill, fight, hit ruthlessly! Kill ruthlessly! Don't give me that timid, saintly teacher look, as if you're so burdened with unspeakable sin! It's disgusting! UGH!"

The child crawled over, crying loudly. "Waah! Dad! Dad, are you all right?!"

He couldn't understand what was happening, only that his father was being trampled. From his point of view, Xie Lian was like an evil devil, but he was so scared of losing his father that he wouldn't back down and tried desperately to pull the boot off his father’s chest. The young man wouldn’t stop spewing blood, scaring the child half to death, and he used his hands to cover his father’s mouth as if that could stop the bleeding. Seeing this, Xie Lian slowly calmed down. He understood that the owner of this body was innocent and eased his foot slightly.

He pointed the tip of Fangxin down, nudging it against Qi Rong’s cheek, and said forebodingly, “Qi Rong, you get the hell out yourself. Don’t believe I won’t pull out your soul with your tongue!”

Theoretically, in pulling out the tongue from its root, one could certainly pull out any ghosts possessing a body along with it.

Qi Rong refused the very idea. “I won’t! I won’t get the hell out! What are you gonna do? Go on, pull! Come, come, come, gonna kill me? I might just die, so don’t miss this chance, otherwise you can forget about ever finding my ashes in this lifetime!”

He even stuck out his tongue intentionally, as if he couldn’t wait for Xie Lian to make good on his threat and use that bloody method to pull his soul out of this fleshy body. He taunted with childish noises of *woo-lah-lah*.

“The one I’m possessing is a nobody anyway, so why don’t you? No one would know, no one would care, Your Highness’s holy radiance won’t suffer a bit of damage. Look! I crumbled your mom to ashes, aren’t you gonna kill me? Ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

That child couldn’t move Xie Lian’s boot, so he hugged his leg and cried louder. “Don’t kill my dad! Don’t kill my daddy!”

Xie Lian’s breathing was becoming more labored, his head dizzy, his body shaking, his hands itching to crush Qi Rong’s skull. But he couldn’t do it. Qi Rong spread his hands in a shrugging motion.

“Ha ha ha ha, Cousin Crown Prince, what a failure, what an absolute failure!”

Xie Lian picked him off the ground, raised his fists, and rained punch after punch down on Qi Rong’s face, yelling with each hit, “Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!”

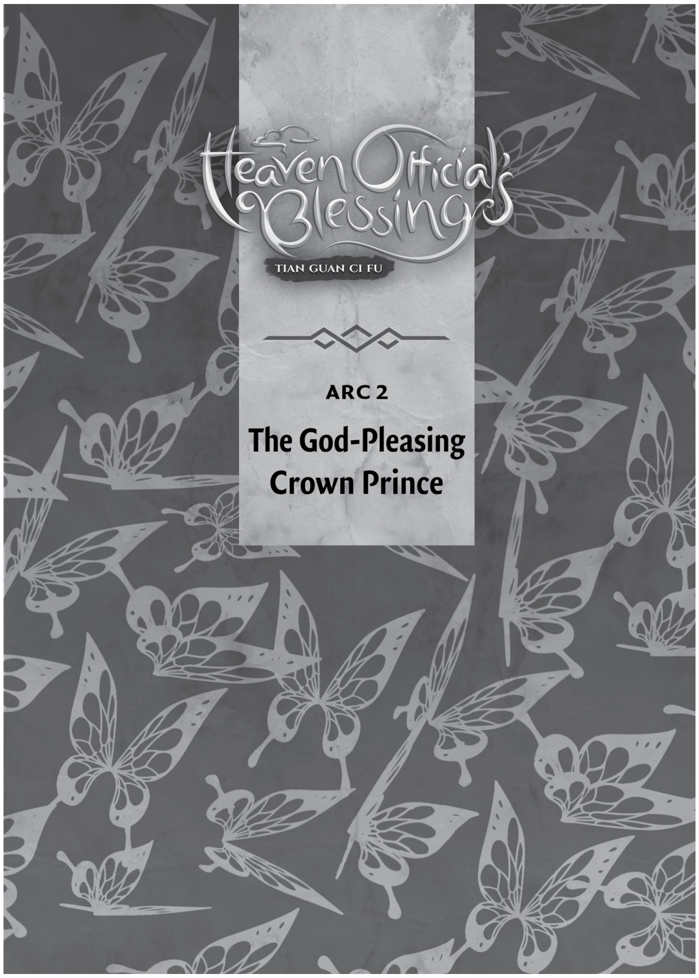
Yet, the more enraged he was, the happier Qi Rong became. It didn’t matter if the price was a violent beating, Qi Rong was filled with rapture at his opportunity to drag both of them down to the same hell. His eyes shone brightly.

“See! There’s your true face! Cousin Crown Prince, is there anyone in this world who knows you better than me? No! You might look like a pathetic lost stray who anyone can trample, but I know too well. You’re still proud on the inside, you could never stand anyone calling you a failure! You must hate me for calling you a failure! Have I stabbed your heart enough to bleed? Hurry! Come! Or are you gonna tell me loudly that this body is innocent, so you won’t kill me in order to spare him? Come! Show me what you’ll do!”

With so much provocation pervading that cocky, insane laughter, Xie Lian couldn’t endure it anymore.

With a metallic *sching*, Fangxin was unsheathed.

And with a flashing swing, the ominous black blade struck down!


Heaven Official's Blessing
TIAN GUAN CI FU

ARC 2

The God-Pleasing Crown Prince

Chapter 25:
Upon the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, A Fleeting Glimpse of Beauty

THE SWORD WAS THRUST, penetrating the heart of the demon, and left it dead on the ground.

“By heaven’s blessings, malevolence is slain and evil is subdued!”

On either side of the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, cheers erupted like an ocean current, coming in wave after wave, each one cresting higher than the last. In the courtyard that stretched before the scarlet-red gates of the palace, the two cultivators who played the roles of god and demon bowed to the surrounding crowds and stepped down, standing off to the side. The martial match that opened the show heightened the excitement in the city. Not only were the streets packed elbow-to-elbow, even the rooftops were full of brave climbers, clapping, hollering, flailing. The crowds went wild.

A celebration of this magnitude was truly brimming and bustling with energy. In the history of the Kingdom of Xianle, if any festival of Shangyuan[13] was to be described thus, it had to be the one happening today!

Upon the towering platform, row after row of finely dressed royals and nobles overlooked the crowd, all wearing courteous smiles on their faces. Within the palace, a line of hundreds waited silently. When the bell chimed, the State Preceptor stroked his nonexistent beard and began to call roll.

“Path-Opening Warriors?”

“Present!”

“Jade maidens?”

“Present!”

“Musicians?”

“Present!”

"Calvary?"

"Present!"

"Demon?"

"Present!"

"The God-Pleasing Martial Warrior?"

No one answered. The State Preceptor frowned as he noticed the complication and turned his head.

"The God-Pleasing Martial Warrior? Where's the crown prince?"

Still, no one responded. The one who had answered to "demon" paused before he removed the monstrous mask, revealing a delicate, fair face.

This youth appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen. His skin and lips were both light in color, fresh and neat, and he bore a pair of bright, shimmering eyes, as black as obsidian. His hair was soft and silky, and a few loose strands lightly littered his forehead and cheeks. He looked quiet and obedient, in contrast to the monstrous demon mask in his hand.

He replied quietly, "His Highness the Crown Prince has left."

The State Preceptor almost fainted. But for the sake of this grand occasion he couldn't faint, so he held on and instead yelled with an angry exasperation. "Wha—?! He left?! When did His Highness leave?! The ceremonial parade is about to leave the palace gates!! When the grand stage is revealed and there's only a demon but no god, my old bones won't be able to swim out of all the spit that'll come flying at me! Mu Qing, why didn't you stop him?!"

Mu Qing hung his head. "When His Highness left, he told me to pass on the message not to worry and that everything can proceed as planned. He will return promptly."

The State Preceptor was in hysterics from anxiety. "How can I not worry? What do you mean, 'promptly'? When is 'promptly'? What if he doesn't make it?!"

Outside the palace gates, the citizens who had been waiting since early morning were losing patience and were noisily demanding for the event to start. A cultivator came rushing forward.

"My Lord State Preceptor, the queen sent a messenger inquiring why the parade hasn't started! The fortuitous hour is fast approaching! If we don't leave now, we'll miss it!"

At those words, the State Preceptor desperately prayed that a rebel army would suddenly invade and disrupt the Shangyuan Parade completely. Why did this headache have to happen right at the most crucial moment?!

If the troublemaker were anyone else, he would've flown into a rage already; no one would consider it a strange urge if he brandished a sword with intent to kill. But this troublemaker just happened to be his very, very favorite, most precious disciple, and the very, very distinguished, most precious son of another. He couldn't beat him, he couldn't yell at him, and he most definitely couldn't kill him. Rather than kill him, he'd more likely kill himself!

Just then, someone ran across the palace's black path and rushed inside, shouting, "Lord State Preceptor, why hasn't the parade started? The hour is about to pass; everyone outside is on edge!"

The one who'd arrived was also a young man of sixteen or seventeen. His build was upright and tall, his skin the color of wheat, and on his back, he carried a long black bow and snow-white quiver. His lips were pressed tight, his brows knit. Even at such a young age, his eyes were determined. The moment the State Preceptor saw him, he grabbed him.

"Feng Xin! Where's That Highness of yours?"

Feng Xin was taken aback, but understanding instantly dawned, and anger filled his eyes as he turned his gaze to Mu Qing. As for Mu Qing, he had already put his demon mask back on without a word, his expression now unseen.

Feng Xin said gravely, "There's no time to explain! Please start the parade immediately, His Highness the Crown Prince will not disappoint you, sir!"

There was no other way. Bringing out a grand stage without the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior was death; delaying the procession and missing the fortuitous hour was also death. Despairingly, the State Preceptor waved his hand.

“Start the music! Depart!”

Upon receiving the command, the flutes and strings started to play, and the hundreds of royal warriors at the front of the procession roared in chorus to begin their march and lead the massive, impressive parade. They had departed!

The warriors at the front symbolized the thorny paths of the mortal world. Immediately following were the virgin girls meticulously selected from thousands of applicants, demure and beautiful. With baskets in their hands, they scattered flowers in the air like the celestial maidens they played, paving the path with blossoms and filling it with fragrance to signify enduring and unsullied virtue.[14] The musicians rode in carriages of gold. The moment the procession left the palace gates, the crowds were amazed and astonished, fighting to catch the flowers. However, no matter how magnificent, how extravagant, how grand, this was only the warm-up act. The grand float, a glorious stage, was about to emerge.

Sixteen white stallions adorned with gold pulled the grand stage from behind the palace gates, slowly bringing it before the eyes of millions. On the stage was a black-clad demon with a monstrous mask on his face and a nine-foot-long saber in his hand. Gravely, he shifted to a fighting stance.

The State Preceptor was tense like a taut string, hoping for a miracle. Yet no miracles occurred. The crowd broke into chatter. Above, on the high platform, the royals and nobles frowned, exchanging wondering looks with each other.

“What’s going on? Why is the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior not on stage?”

“Has His Highness the Crown Prince not arrived yet?”

“Where’s Lian-gege?”

At the center of the tall platform sat a dignified, handsome man and a fair-skinned, amiable, gracious noblewoman. They were the king and queen of the Kingdom of Xianle. Not seeing the one who should be there, the queen gave the king a worried look. The king took hold of her hand and used his gaze to comfort, telling her not to worry and to watch and see what would happen. The crowds below, however, had no one to comfort them, and their cries grew louder, so much so that the noise could almost raise the rooftops. The State Preceptor could only blame himself for not having the courage to kill himself right then and there. Yet, on stage, Mu Qing was quite calm. Even without his opponent he remained meticulous, taking care of his own stage directions. *CLANG*, he hurled his heavy saber down into the stage, standing it upright before him.

Pantomiming an act of chilling slaughter, the black-clad youth impressively ended the opening act as the “demon.”

By face and by form, Mu Qing was delicate and elegant like a gentle scholar. And yet he still swung an impossibly heavy three-meter saber as if it were feather-light in his hands, as if it were weightless. Another group of cultivators playing the roles of demon vanquishers leapt onto the stage one by one, and one by one they were instantly defeated and chased off the stage. That saber danced skillfully and made the performance quite exciting to watch, so some in the crowds cheered for him. Except the people didn’t come to watch “Demon Causing Havoc,” so after that act there were more complaints.

“Where’s the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior?!”

“Where’s His Highness the Crown Prince?!”

“We want to see His Highness playing the Heavenly Emperor! Defeat the evil!”

Upon the towering platform, a furious voice shouted, “Where’s my cousin? What the hell?! Who wants to watch this crap? Where the fuck is my cousin the crown prince?!”

No need to confirm who that was—obviously that loud voice belonged to none other than Prince Xiao Jing, Qi Rong. Sure enough, many looked up and saw a young man, finely dressed in light turquoise brocade and a necklace, rush to the edge of that platform shaking his fists angrily. This youth was no older than fifteen or sixteen, his face fair and his brows black, rather attractive. But his face was twisted murderously, as if he was going to jump off the tower at any moment to beat someone. However, the tower was too tall—if he jumped, he’d break his legs if not die. So instead, he grabbed a white jade teapot and hurled it down.

That hurled teapot flew quickly right at the back of the demon’s head, looking like it might knock him out on the spot and spill his blood.

Unexpectedly, however, the demon shifted his stance, slanted his saber flat, and caught the teapot on the tip of the blade. The tottering teapot came to a stop, prompting another wave of cheers. Mu Qing then flicked the long saber, and the teapot was hurled into the air to be caught by someone below.

He continued to play the role of the demon languidly, swinging the long saber, slaughtering humans. Qi Rong was outraged and was about to throw something else, but the queen had ordered someone to pull him away, so he was reluctantly dragged off. Yet the faces of the nobles were looking more and more grim, and some were growing restless.

That the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior would disappear right before the Heavenly Procession of the Shangyuan Festival was no laughing matter!

But just then, a roaring cheer like a storm exploded from amongst the people, louder than the cheers from before. A snow-white silhouette had descended from the sky and landed right before the black-clad demon!

Upon his landing, his heavy white robes fluttered and covered the grand stage in the shape of a giant flower, and a golden mask hid his face. He held a sword in one hand, and the other gently flicked that foreboding blade, the resounding ringing pleasing to the ear. This gesture was serene and confident, as if the demon meant nothing to him. The demon slowly raised his long saber and pointed it at him, and the white-clad martial warrior unhurriedly rose to his feet.

Qi Rong’s eyes were shining bright, his face red. He jumped up and down, shouting, “Cousin Crown Prince! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE HAS COME!!!”

Above and below, all were agape.

This entrance was like the descent of a real heavenly being, exceedingly audacious!

The city wall’s tower was at least thirty meters tall, and the eminent crown prince, whose person was worth a thousand gold, had still leapt down from it! In that moment, thousands had thought a god had truly descended. When they recovered from their shock, fervor filled their veins; the crowd went hysterical, applauding with wild intensity. Qi Rong too was shouting, leading the crowd in wild applause, yelling until his voice was hoarse, clapping until both his hands were red. The king and the queen shared a look, smiling, and applauded too. The rest of the nobles eased their furrowed brows and sighed a breath of relief before joining in the cheer. On either side of the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, the crowds went wild like crashing waves, hundreds and thousands of men so excited that they pushed against the royal guards, wanting to approach closer to holler.

Upon the grand stage, two figures—one black, one white—faced each other. Each with their own weapon in hand, god and demon would finally face off.

Seeing that everything had worked out, the State Preceptor finally relaxed his shoulders and mounted the towering platform. After nodding to his fellows in greeting, he found a seat for himself and sat down.

The king chuckled. “State Preceptor, how did you come up with such an exhilarating entrance? How splendid.”

The State Preceptor wiped sweat from his face and smiled. “Splendid indeed. But unfortunately, this lowly subject didn’t come up with it. I’m afraid it’s His Highness the Crown Prince’s own idea.”

The queen patted her heart. “That mischievous child. To jump from such a height without a word of warning! I almost stood up in fright.”

The State Preceptor couldn’t help but lace his words with pride. “My Lady Queen can be at ease. The martial might of His Highness the Crown

Prince is extraordinary. Dozens of meters is nothing to him. Even with towers that are many times higher, he can easily mount and easily jump off with his eyes closed.”

The queen appeared pleased and said gently, “Thanks to the teachings of the State Preceptor.”

The State Preceptor laughed. “It’s nothing, it’s nothing. His Highness the Crown Prince, darling of the heavens, is divinely gifted, marvelously talented, and graciously brilliant. It is the fortune accumulated from three lifetimes that gave this lowly subject the chance to become his teacher. I have a feeling that with His Highness the Crown Prince’s presence, today will go down in history as the most impressive of the God-Pleasing Ceremony’s Martial Matches.”

His words of praise were exceedingly smooth, alluding to the heavens. The king smiled and turned back to watch the performance.

“I hope that’s the case.”

In the Heavenly Procession of the Shangyuan Festival, the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and the Demon were the two most important roles. Both must be played by young men exceptionally skilled in martial arts. The God-Pleasing Martial Warrior especially—the presentation and make of his costume were strict, transcendentally magnificent, and after dressing, the weight of everything worn came to twenty-five or thirty kilos. The Martial Warrior must, under this heavy burden, before the eyes of millions, march around the capital a number of times and perform in the Martial Match for at least four hours. There must also be no mishaps throughout, and so the performer must be extraordinarily skilled.

Fortunately, both of these young men were outstanding. It was a fierce match, the saber parried the sword—the combat was a thrilling sight to behold. The moves were also calculated to the minutest detail, obviously having been practiced and rehearsed many times.

“Who’s the one playing the demon and sparring with the crown prince?” the king asked.

The State Preceptor cleared his throat. “Your Majesty, he’s a young trainee from the Royal Holy Temple. His name is Mu Qing.”

The queen said sweetly, “I see that child is also rather skilled in fighting, just a bit weaker than my son. Maybe about the same level as Feng Xin?”

The State Preceptor didn’t appear to agree with her sentiment. Qi Rong had been lying on the queen’s lap eating grapes, and he spat out the skins in a rush.

“Psh, psh, psh! No way, no way! Not just a bit weaker, he’s faaaar weaker! Not just anyone can compare to Cousin Crown Prince!”

Hearing this, the queen patted his head, smiling, and the rest of the nobles all laughed, their bodies swaying back and forth in mirth. They teased, “Rong-er certainly clings to his cousin! If a day passes when he doesn’t praise him, he’s miserable.”

Down below in the sea of people, the cheers and hollers were shooting through the heavens.

“Fight! Fight! Kill him!”

“Slay the demon!”

The roars of excitement were growing stronger. Qi Rong was also adding to the noise, circling both his hands around his mouth like a trumpet, shouting and laughing.

“COUSIN CROWN PRINCE, GO! YOU CAN EASILY KNOCK HIM DOWN WITH ONE HAND! SHOW HIM HOW IT’S DONE!”

Suddenly, the demon on the stage slashed forward. The Martial Warrior repelled the attack with his sword but made a noise of curiosity.

During the Heavenly Parade, the Martial Match was a performance for pleasing the gods, and at most, one should use just a seventh of their power, pulling their swords at contact. However, with that strike he received just now, the sword in his hand had almost flown from his grip. Obviously, his opponent had used all of his might in that blow.

Xie Lian raised his head slightly and called out, “Mu Qing?”

The young man playing the demon didn’t say a word, just slashed at him again. Xie Lian had no time to think as he received one attack after the other, their weapons clanging.

Well, this is more exciting than fake sparring, Xie Lian thought, and his spirit heightened, immersing himself more into the fight.

Thus, under the crashing roar of cheers, the weapons clashed and sparks flew. The more invigorating the fight was on stage, the louder the cheers below.

Suddenly, there was a deafening clang. White light flashed, and the crowd gasped, their breaths hitched. That three-meter saber was flicked out of the demon's hand by the long slender sword of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and was nailed directly into a stone pillar of the towering platform. A few bystanders tried to pull it out, but even when they pulled with all their strength, the long saber didn't move an inch. They were greatly astonished.

"What kind of saber is this? What strength you'd need to wield it!"

Upon the grand stage, the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior shook his sword, and he flicked his finger on the blade again. Another resonant ring, and from behind the golden mask there came soft chuckling.

"You fought well. But you still lost," Xie Lian said, cheerfully and leisurely.

With his weapon lost, the demon bent one knee to the ground. He was still silent, but his fists clenched harder. Xie Lian skillfully twirled his sword and, surrounded by the cheers from all around, prepared to make his final strike and "slay" the demon.

Just then, there was screaming from above!

Shocked, Xie Lian lowered his sword and looked up, but he was only able to see a blurry shadow plunging rapidly from the city wall.

In that split second, he didn't have time to think. He pointed his toes and pushed off the ground in a flash to leap into the air, darting upward weightlessly.

He surged and flew, his sleeves fluttering open like the wings of a butterfly, then landed gracefully, light as a feather. Firmly in his hold was a person, and only when he touched solid ground did Xie Lian sigh a breath of relief and look down.

In his arms there was a child, his head wrapped in bandages, dirty and unkempt. He was curled up in his hold and watching him dazedly.

This child was no older than seven or eight, and quite the small, gaunt creature. After falling from such a height, his little body was shaking uncontrollably in his arms like a newborn animal. However, from that mess of bandages wrapped around his head there peeked a large black eye that reflected the silhouette of a snow-white figure. He was watching him unblinkingly, as if he could no longer see anything else.

Loud gasps were heard from all around, and when Xie Lian raised his head, his heart sank. In his peripheral vision, he saw lying on the ground not far away a golden object. The golden mask that hid his face had fallen.

Xie Lian had landed in the middle of the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, and the ceremonial parade was dozens of meters behind him, the procession not having made it this far yet. The sudden commotion broke the steady march of the warriors, the flower-tossing celestial maidens looked panicked, the golden carriages stopped, a number of white stallions stomped their hooves and neighed in alarm, and the strings missed notes with their rhythm disrupted. Some kept going, and some stopped. Without being able to coordinate their march again, the entire situation was spiraling out of control. The crowd on both sides of the street still hadn't had the chance to react, but the King of Xianle upon the towering platform stood up immediately, looking worried and grave as he watched his son.

The moment he stood, how could the rest of the nobles remain seated? Thus, they all rose to their feet in a frenzy. The State Preceptor's bottom had only just warmed his seat, but now it was cold again. He was frantically deciding whether he needed to prostrate on all fours immediately to beg for forgiveness when Qi Rong leapt onto the railing, his sleeves rolled up, shouting in rage.

"WHAT'S GOING ON NOW? WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHY DID THE PROCESSION FALL INTO CHAOS? WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU USELESS TRASH DOING? DID YOU ALL EAT NOTHING BUT PLAIN RICE, CAN'T EVEN HOLD YOUR HORSES?!"

The queen's face was pale, her brows lightly knitted, and she hurriedly sent for another person to drag him back. The crowds were growing agitated and a riot was about to erupt when just then, Xie Lian rose to his feet once more.

Usually, the honorable crown prince was hidden deep within the palace or training at the Royal Holy Temple, so he rarely had the chance to show his face to the people. This was such a rare occasion that many couldn't help but be intrigued, their gazes all falling on him. Yet when they gazed upon his face, their breathing hitched. That young man had long brows and charming eyes, exceptionally handsome, radiating nobility, so dazzling it forced down the eyes of those looking. With the child in one arm, he slowly raised the other with sword in hand, and pointed it to the grand stage.

The demon had been observing the situation from above the stage, and seeing that gesture, he paused for a moment before leaping off the parade float.

The crowd wowed in amazement as the demon, his form like a streak of black cloud, stole through the air to the stone pillar where the saber was deeply embedded. He gripped the hilt and yanked the saber out of the crack, then flipped again to land in the middle of the street before the martial warrior.

Seeing that he instantaneously understood his intentions and came forward to cooperate, Xie Lian lauded him under his breath, "Good, Mu Qing!"

Now both the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and the demon had descended from the stage. One black, one white, one saber and one sword clashed once again, heightening the excitement, electrifying the crowd. Upon the towering platform, the faces of nobles finally relaxed, looking appeased.

The demon feigned aiming for the child in the warrior's arms; with both his hands gripping the saber, he flashed the blade, then lunged at Xie Lian. The two faked parrying, move after move, strike after strike, before they leapt back onto the stage anew. While the crowd was distracted, Mu Qing used the opportunity to do a somersault onto the street and grab that golden mask, then dashed through the procession, urging in a low voice:

"Stay in formation! Compose yourselves! Pretend nothing's happened and continue the march! Finish marching this round and return to the palace!”

Everyone in the procession immediately steadied and returned to their posts, their spirits renewed. The moment Mu Qing returned to the stage, his attacks became even more vigorous, clinking and clanking as Xie Lian received more slashes. Just then, the child in his arms cried out, probably terrified from being stuck between the clashing weapons.

Xie Lian’s left hand held him tighter, and he whispered, “Don’t be scared!”

Hearing his words, the small child clutched the folds of Xie Lian’s robes at his chest. Even with a child in one arm and the other hand handling a sword, Xie Lian was still fighting with ease. After parrying for a while, he felt the child in his hold raise his trembling arms and grab his shoulders in a desperate grip, as if he were hanging on for dear life.

Xie Lian soothed again, “Don’t worry, nothing will hurt you.”

Then, Xie Lian ordered in a hushed voice, “Mu Qing!”

The demon facing him imperceptibly nodded, and Xie Lian struck.

Thus, before the eyes of millions, the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior pierced the heart of the demon, slaying it on the spot!

Mu Qing, with his demon mask on, clutched his “wound,” stumbled back a few steps, and struggled for a moment before finally—*THUD*—he fell to the ground and stopped moving.

Above, on the platform, Qi Rong laughed out loud, applauding.

“DEAD! HE’S DEAD! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE HAS SLAIN THE DEMON DEAD!”

While all this was happening, the magnificent Heavenly Procession had continued to march and soon moved onto the path back to the palace. Because of how well the act was saved and how the unexpected improvised act was so exhilarating to watch, not only did the people not complain, but their excitement grew even stronger. Countless within the crowd were shouting “Your Highness!” or hollering “God!” and followed behind the grand stage, thousands upon millions rushing to the palace. A few generals had to send out more troops of warriors and soldiers to block the overly excited people. In the end, they still couldn’t hold them back, and the crowd broke through, pushing themselves toward the palace gates.

The King of Xianle ordered from the top of the towering platform, “Guards! Warriors!”

Meanwhile, the hundreds within the procession had reentered the palace, and the giant scarlet gates closed soundly shut after the grand stage, the colorful banners of the performance now out of sight. The people rushed the gates, knocking and slapping upon it, their cheers shooting to the heavens.

Inside those firmly shut palace gates, upon the grand stage, the white-clad God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and the black-clad demon both tossed their weapons aside with clanking sounds before they collapsed heavily on the ground.

Xie Lian was covered in sweat and ripped open layer after layer of his elegant costume before he heaved a long breath. “That was close. Too close. I’m exhausted.”

Mu Qing also removed his heavy demon mask and let out a silent sigh, but he didn’t complain about being tired. When he looked over, he saw that Xie Lian was still holding on to that young child and frowned wordlessly. Feng Xin, on the other hand, called out as he followed after the grand stage in a jog.

“Your Highness, what are you doing bringing that child in too?”

The young child was lying on Xie Lian’s chest, his small body frozen and unmoving, afraid to even breathe loudly. Xie Lian sat up.

“What was I to do, throw him back out on the streets? It’s a mess out there, and he’s such a tiny creature. He’d get trampled to death.”

He held up the small child and stroked his head, asking casually, “How old are you, little one?”

The child didn’t blink, and his lips uttered no sounds.

Xie Lian continued his query, coaxing, “How did you come to fall earlier?”

“Your Highness, the child probably doesn’t dare to speak. He’s obviously scared witless,” Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian stroked the head of the child again, but his unresponsiveness was making him lose interest, so he eventually stopped.

“What a silly child,” Xie Lian commented. “Feng Xin, go find someone to take him out through the side doors when you get a chance. And check if he’s injured—his head is wrapped in bandages.”

“All right.” Feng Xin extended his hand. “Give him here.”

Xie Lian held the young child up to pass him over, but when he tried, Feng Xin said, “Your Highness, why haven’t you let go?”

“I did let go…?”

Xie Lian was puzzled, but when he looked down, he laughed in exasperation. It turned out it was the child, who was still clutching tightly onto his clothes, refusing to let go.

A few were taken aback and started laughing out loud. While training at the Royal Holy Temple, so many devotees, men and women alike, tried their hardest to get a glimpse of Xie Lian, whether out of curiosity or devotion. But as soon they’d seen him once, they would want to see him again; if they could train next to him, even better. They couldn’t believe that a child of such a young age would be the same. Guarding the grand stage were many young trainees from the Royal Holy Temple, and they all laughed.

“Your Highness, this child doesn’t want to leave!”

Xie Lian also laughed. “Is that right? That won’t do. I’ve got my own things to take care of. Go home, little guy.”

At his words, the child finally, slowly loosened his grip, letting go of his clothes, and Feng Xin picked him up. Even when Feng Xin was the one holding him, the child still stared fixedly at Xie Lian with his big, bright black eye, almost as if he’d been possessed. At this sight, many started grumbling under their breaths. Xie Lian himself, however, wasn’t even looking at the child anymore, and only spoke to Feng Xin directly.

“Don’t dangle him like you’re picking up trash. You’re scaring him.”

Feng Xin put the child back down on the ground. “Enough joking around. The State Preceptor is freaking out. Your Highness better think about how you’re going to face him later.”

Hearing this, everyone stopped laughing.

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An hour later, at the Royal Holy Temple, on the Divine Might Summit, inside the Palace of Divine Might…

Clouds of incense wafted in the air, and the sound of chanting came in waves. The Chief State Preceptor and three other Deputy State Preceptors sat in a line by the side wall within the great hall, their faces clouded. Mu Qing was kneeling before them. Xie Lian was also kneeling, but before him was no one but the golden statue of the Heavenly Emperor. Feng Xin followed his master and knelt behind him.

The State Preceptor picked up that exquisitely crafted golden mask, and after a moment, he heaved a heavy sigh. “Your Highness, Your Highness.”

Even when kneeling, Xie Lian’s back was straight, his posture perfect and his head held high. “Present.”

The State Preceptor looked pained. “Do you know that, in the history of Xianle, and the countless Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Processions we have held, never once has the grand stage only circled the capital thrice. Thrice!”

In the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, every ritual, every decoration, every place had a meaning behind it. To have the grand stage circle the capital once symbolized the kingdom’s prayer for the peace and prosperity of the people for one year; thus, however many rounds the grand stage made meant that many years before another such grand ceremony would need to take place. Not only did this signify good fortune, it also saved money. Having only made three rounds, didn’t that mean the kingdom would only be protected for three years?!

The worst thing on top of that was that the golden mask on the face of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior had fallen mid-ritual.

Since ancient times, the people of Xianle had believed that the spiritual qi of a person gathered upon the five facial features; the spirit of a person was on their face, and the best must be offered to the heavens. Thus, while performing the ceremony, the Martial Warrior must wear a golden mask to hide his face, because his face could only be appreciated by the gods, and mortals had no right to see it.

The State Preceptor was both furious and disappointed. “The God-Pleasing Martial Warriors of the past circled the capital at least five times, at most fifteen or sixteen times. You? You could do fifty with your eyes closed! A hundred even! But you killed yourself dead at three—why didn’t you just kill me, your shifu, first? Now look at you. Our dear Highness the Crown Prince is going to go down in history, dragging me along with you!”

No one dared speak in the great hall, and yet Xie Lian still looked at ease and responded calmly.

“Perhaps the State Preceptor should look at it this way. If that child had fallen to his death with no one to catch him, spilling blood on the path of the procession, wouldn’t that be equally ominous? Wouldn’t the parade still have to come to a stop? At the very least, the ceremony ended fairly respectably, which was the best-case scenario. Let’s just call what happened an accident.”

For a moment, the State Preceptor’s words were stuck in his throat, but then he blew up. “You child! With so many royal guards at the scene, anyone could’ve caught him! Even if the catch was off and he broke his arm, he wouldn’t have died. You could’ve just marched forward a few steps, performed a little flashier, and everyone would’ve forgotten whatever had fallen and moved on.”

Xie Lian raised his brows, however. “State Preceptor, you understand as well as I do. Under those circumstances, no one else but me could have reacted as fast, and there was no second person who could’ve caught him without being injured. Let him fall, there’d be one dead. Catch him, and there’d be two dead.”

His tone was matter-of-fact and confident. The State Preceptor also knew that what he said was true and couldn’t refute him. Seeing him kneel before the divine statue, looking like all was well and nothing was the matter, made the State Preceptor angry, amused, and proud all at once. Before his precious, darling disciple, he just couldn’t get angry, and could only pull at his own hair and use the pain of his scalp to relieve the worry in his heart.

After a pause, the State Preceptor spoke again. “Another thing!”

Xie Lian inclined his head. “This disciple is listening.”

“You did well on stage today,” the State Preceptor said. “But no matter how well you perform, you can’t just suddenly change things up right before the start without a word of warning. Both majesties were terrified by your act today. Do you know what would have happened if we missed the fortuitous hour?”

Xie Lian raised his brows, looking puzzled. “State Preceptor, hadn’t I already asked for your permission in regard to this before today?”

The State Preceptor was taken aback too. “You asked already? Before today? When?”

Hearing this, Xie Lian turned his head to the side, his brows furrowed. “Mu Qing?”

Chapter 26:
Lost Red Pearl, Inadvertently Luring the Red-Eyed[15]

JUST THEN, Feng Xin, who was kneeling behind Xie Lian, spoke up grimly. “His Highness did indeed mention it yesterday.”

All eyes moved to him, and Feng Xin continued.

“Recently, His Highness has been putting a lot of thought into the Heavenly Procession, and yesterday he suddenly came up with the extraordinary idea of jumping off the tower to simulate celestial descent without changing anything else in the programming. At the time, His Highness was in the middle of rehearsals and couldn’t excuse himself, so he sent Mu Qing to pass on word to the State Preceptor and request the go-ahead.”

He raised his head, slight anger in his eyes.

“Mu Qing returned and told His Highness that the State Preceptors had been informed, so His Highness performed today under the impression that he had permission. Who knew that the State Preceptor was never told and that we almost ruined the event!”

The cultivators all looked at each other in dismay.

The State Preceptor asked, “Who knew of this?”

The three Deputy State Preceptors shook their heads, all denying that they knew anything. The State Preceptor turned to Mu Qing, his stormy expression turning into one of indignant anger.

“Mu Qing, you intentionally withheld this communication?”

His words and expression showed he already firmly believed that Mu Qing had purposely sabotaged the event. Xie Lian glanced at the silent, thin youth kneeling on the side and pondered his words before he spoke.

“State Preceptor, I think there must be some kind of misunderstanding here.”

Hearing this, Mu Qing slowly looked over, his gaze profoundly dark but not lingering.

Xie Lian said, “If he had purposely held back word, once the event was over and we all compared notes, his deceit would be exposed and there’d be no way he could escape responsibility. Mu Qing is not a short-sighted imbecile, and he wouldn’t have come up with such a low tactic. Besides, with the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior missing, what advantage does his demon opponent have? Please hear him out, State Preceptor, and then draw your conclusions.”

Finishing his speech, Xie Lian inclined his head.

“Tell us, Mu Qing. What happened?”

Mu Qing lowered his eyes and said softly, “I did pass on what His Highness bade me to say yesterday.”

The State Preceptor frowned. “Wouldn’t we know ourselves what you did or did not say? When did you tell us?”

“Yesterday, an hour after the evening lesson, when the four State Preceptors were resting at Sixiang Palace, this disciple spoke from outside the window,” Mu Qing said.

The State Preceptor turned his head to his three fellows, looking puzzled. “Yesterday, after the evening lessons? What were we doing then?”

Just as he asked, he remembered, and traces of awkwardness colored his face. The other three Deputy State Preceptors also coughed nervously, their responses ambiguous.

“Nothing really. Just…resting is resting!”

Seeing how the State Preceptors stammered, everyone understood immediately.

The Royal Holy Temple was a place of quiet meditation and training, and there was very little entertainment save for small games that could serve as amusement. One of them, the most popular one, was playing cards.

Cards could only be played in secret, seen by no one. The State Preceptors had long been bored out of their minds residing at the Royal Holy Temple, so they were heavily addicted. When they started playing, they would forget everything and everyone and fall into a state akin to hysterical obsession or drunkenness. Nothing from the outside world could be heard. If Mu Qing had told them anything at that time, how could they possibly hear?

One of the Deputy State Preceptors said, “Oh, um…maybe there were too many people, your voice was too quiet, and we didn’t hear clearly. Yeah, we didn’t hear clearly.”

The State Preceptor, on the other hand, was doubtful. “Did you actually go to Sixiang Palace yesterday?”

“I absolutely did,” Mu Qing said, and as proof, he relayed without fault the dress, look, and accent of the guard standing at the door.

The State Preceptor had to believe him, but still he frowned. “If you had gone to Sixiang Palace, you could’ve just passed on the message to the trainee outside the door or entered the chamber and spoken to us in detail. Why speak outside by the window? You didn’t even confirm whether we heard?”

Mu Qing responded softly, “This disciple tried. This disciple spoke politely to the shixiong guarding the door, but for some reason that shixiong had to make things difficult and wouldn’t let me into the chamber or pass on word for me. He mocked me and drove me away.”

After a pause, he continued, “This disciple had no other choice, so I went around to the other side of Sixiang Palace and tried to pass on the message through the window. After I spoke, I heard one of the State Preceptors say ‘I get it, now leave,’ so this disciple took that as consent to His Highness’s plans and returned.”

The State Preceptors pursed their lips and didn’t speak.

At the height of a round of cards, who would pay attention to whatever was said outside? If they heard anything, of course they’d respond offhandedly with “I get it, I get it.” But they probably didn’t even know where the voice came from!

Xie Lian knitted his brows. “That such a thing would happen! Which trainee was that impudent? He’s got guts to be so disrespectful to one of my messengers.”

Although Xie Lian was usually friendly and rarely put on airs when interacting with others at the Royal Holy Temple, he was still nonetheless the esteemed son of the king, the prominent crown prince. Even as he knelt before the statue of a god, he had not shown any humility. So with this sudden turn to sternness, he was authoritative without needing fury. Everyone fell quiet, and the State Preceptors wore unreadable expressions on their faces.

“Why didn’t you report this to me when you returned yesterday?” Xie Lian asked.

Mu Qing turned around while still kneeling, and prostrated, his voice quiet. “Your Highness, there’s no need to look further into the matter with that shixiong. I didn’t say anything after returning yesterday simply because I don’t want to make this into a big deal. In any case, it’s nothing major. If Your Highness was to defend me openly, it would hurt the camaraderie between everyone.”

Xie Lian disagreed, sounding upset. “What ‘camaraderie’ are you talking about? The kind of camaraderie that’s used to abuse others?”

Hearing this, the State Preceptors sitting on the side looked even more agitated. At the end of the day, something like this happened because the State Preceptors disliked Mu Qing. When they were displeased, the trainee attendants naturally followed their lead—not to mention that Mu Qing himself simply wasn’t very likable. So, not only did fellow trainees avoid helping him, they went out of their way to make things difficult for him at every turn.

Of course, their high and mighty disciple wasn’t trying to ridicule them on purpose, but he certainly did take a jab.

Mu Qing was continuously making concessions in his story, but Feng Xin couldn’t listen for another minute and suddenly interjected.

“It really was nothing major, but you had to go and make it complicated. If you had told the trainee at the door that you came to deliver a message at His Highness’s command, would he still have the gall to block your way? Also, right before we departed today, the State Preceptor asked you where His Highness went. Why did you answer so vaguely? Could you not have said clearly that His Highness was on top of the tower waiting for the procession to start?”

Mu Qing immediately argued back, calm and steady, “I thought the State Preceptor already knew and didn’t expect to be asked that question, so I was confused. But right after, I told the State Preceptor that His Highness had already said not to worry, that the procession could start without delay as planned, and that His Highness would be back promptly. His Highness might not have been there at the time, but there were many at the scene who heard me, so how can you say I did this intentionally? Or that I was being vague?”

Feng Xin stared at him angrily. But if he thought about it carefully, Mu Qing did in fact say all that—the problem was that the State Preceptor was too anxious and didn’t want to make hasty decisions. If he was going to pick at faults, there really wasn’t enough evidence to prove anything.

Just then, Xie Lian spoke up again. “All right, all right. It was all just an untimely mistake, a misunderstanding. Let’s count it as bad luck, so stop fighting.”

Feng Xin looked extremely displeased, but mindful of his position, he dared not be clamorous in the Palace of Divine Might and stopped talking. The State Preceptor didn’t want to pursue this topic anymore either. After all, if they must get to the heart of the topic, wasn’t he at fault too for being too engrossed in card games? Thus, he simply waved and sighed.

“Let’s talk about that later, and we shall put our heads together and think of a way to see how this situation can be salvaged. The three of you are dismissed; go remove your costumes and do whatever else you must.”

Xie Lian bowed and rose to his feet immediately. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both properly kowtowed once before rising, following Xie Lian, who was about to leave. Xie Lian had one foot over the threshold when he heard the State Preceptor speak up again.

“Your Highness.”

Xie Lian turned his head.

“Both His Majesty the King and Her Ladyship the Queen asked after you today. If you have time in the next few days, go and see them,” the State Preceptor said.

Xie Lian grinned. “This disciple understands.”

After leaving the Palace of Divine Might, the three of them traversed a large portion of the summit and returned to the training hall built especially for the crown prince: the Palace of Xianle. There, Xie Lian could finally remove his ceremonial garb.

As mentioned before, for the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, the ceremonial attire of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior was exceedingly strict in every detail. Each accessory and fold had meaning and could never be mismanaged. For example, the outer robe was white, symbolizing divine purity. The inner robes were red, symbolizing canonical tradition. The golden crown that fastened the hair symbolized imperial power and wealth, and the white plumes folded away by the heart symbolized the flight to ascension. Loose corded ribbons along the sleeves symbolized his duties to carry the common people. And so on, and so on.

It was easy to imagine that, from head to toe, both wearing and removing it was no simple task. However, as the esteemed crown prince, naturally he needn't do anything himself. He only had to stand and open his arms wide in that refreshing, fragrant chamber and chat with Feng Xin while he waited for his personal attendant Mu Qing to help him remove layer after layer of the God-Pleasing costume.

The outer white robe of the God-Pleasing costume was of high quality—the pattern of the thread was exquisite and detailed, and the fringes were sewn with intricate light golden patterns, elegant but not frivolous. In comparison, the black martial gi of the demon costume was like the difference between heaven and earth. Mu Qing himself hadn't removed his black gear yet, his hands full with the God-Pleasing costume he had removed from Xie Lian. His fingers twitched, imperceptibly stroking the material of that white robe.

Next to him, Xie Lian removed the golden crown, letting his long hair loose as he sat down on the edge of his sandalwood bed. He kicked off his snow-white boots and waited for someone to bring him fresh clothes. He waited for a bit but noticed that Mu Qing wasn't moving, so he tilted his head.

He asked, "What's wrong?"

Mu Qing quickly snapped out of it and replied, "The costume seems dirty in some places."

Xie Lian hummed thoughtfully and said, “Bring it over and let me see?”

Sure enough, the snow-white attire was marked by two distinct little black handprints. Xie Lian took a look and remarked, “They’re probably from that little kid who fell from the sky. He was grabbing on to me and wouldn’t let go. The child’s face was wrapped in bandages, so maybe he had taken a tumble elsewhere or something. Feng Xin, did you check him out?”

Feng Xin was just wrapping up the sword and long saber used during the God-Pleasing performance, and he replied gloomily, “No. I took him out of the palace and was about to take a look at his face, as you asked, but he kicked me in the shin! It actually fucking hurt.”

Xie Lian fell over on the bed laughing, pointing at him. “It must be because you’re so mean. Otherwise, why didn’t he kick me but did kick you?”

“I wasn’t mean!” Feng Xin cried. “That damn kid ran away so quick, it was like he was possessed by the devil or something. If he hadn’t, I would’ve picked him up upside down and shook until he cried from fright.”

Mu Qing turned the white robe over in his hands. “I hope that kid isn’t a beggar—he’s so dirty. A simple grab left black prints like these. Your Highness, the God-Pleasing costume can’t be dirty. Isn’t that another bad omen?”

Xie Lian stayed lying on the bed, and he casually grabbed a book from the headboard and used it to cover half of his face. “Three times around the capital—my good name’s already going down in history with that incredible record. If it’s dirty, it’s dirty. Just wash it.”

After a pause, Mu Qing replied quietly, “I will do my best to be careful when I wash it.”

Xie Lian flipped through the book and came to a page illustrating the art of the saber, and he remembered the vigorous sparring earlier that day onstage. He smiled.

“Mu Qing, you fought well onstage today.”

Mu Qing’s shoulders stiffened.

Xie Lian continued, “It was only today that I discovered you’re much more skilled with the saber than you are with the sword.”

Mu Qing’s face relaxed, and he turned around. There was even a little smile playing on his lips. “Really?”

“Yeah!” Xie Lian answered. “But you might’ve been too hasty. Swinging a saber isn’t like swinging a sword. Look here…”

The moment the topic shifted to martial arts, Xie Lian became highly enthusiastic—even more possessed than the State Preceptors playing cards. He jumped off the bed without even putting on shoes, demonstrating his point on the spot using his hand as an imaginary saber. Mu Qing wore a complicated expression, but after Xie Lian demonstrated a few moves, he started to watch seriously. Feng Xin, on the other hand, swung the now-properly-wrapped long saber and chased Xie Lian back onto the bed with it, scolding as he did so.

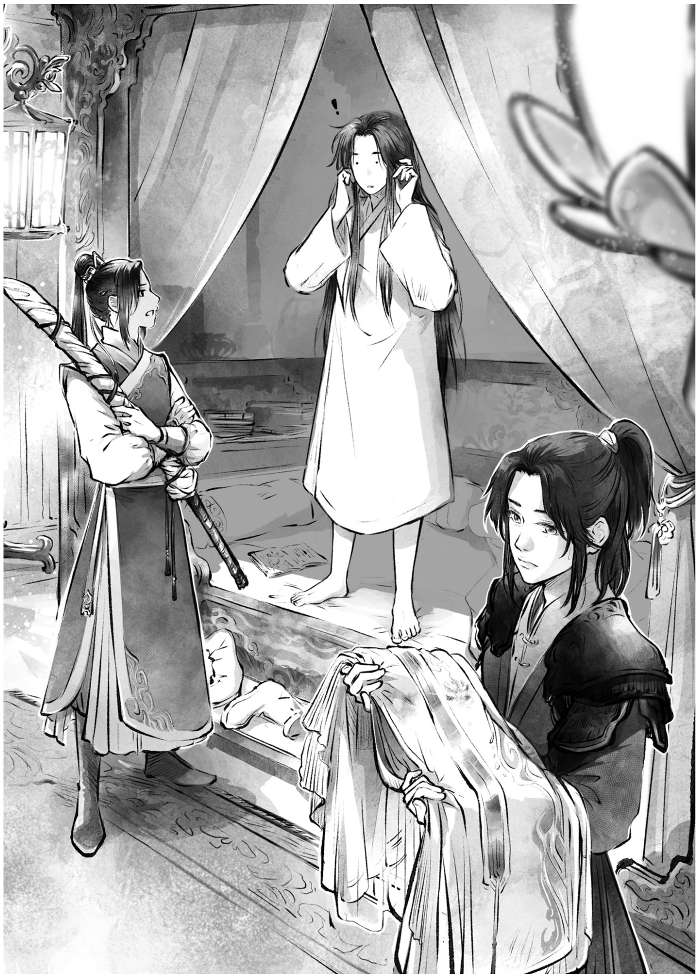
“If you’re going to show off, at least put on your shoes before you do! You’re the crown prince! Hair loose and feet bare, what a disgrace!”

Xie Lian was just at the height of his excitement when he got chased onto the bed like a duck to a pen. He sulked.

“All right! Jeez,” he said and ran both hands through his long hair, ready to tie it up before continuing his lecture to Mu Qing. Suddenly, he frowned. “That’s weird.”

“What is it?” Feng Xin asked.

Xie Lian pulled at his earlobes. “One of the earrings is gone.”



The people of Xianle believed that the pinnacle of Daoist cultivation was the harmony of yin and yang, the unity of male and female. The forms of the gods were inexhaustibly changing and naturally unbound by gender restrictions, shifting male or female as they willed. And that belief was woven into the design of the God-Pleasing costume. Throughout history, every God-Pleasing Martial Warrior was adorned in accessories that possessed the form and details of both sexes: earrings, bracelets, and so on. When Xie Lian was preparing for the role, he pierced his ears and put on a pair of earrings.

They were a pair of magnificent, deep red coral pearls that gleamed resplendently, lustrous and smooth and extremely rare. However, when Xie Lian was combing his hair just now, only one of the red coral pearls from the pair was left.

The moment he said it was lost, Mu Qing's relaxed expression froze again, but the other two did not notice at all. Feng Xin looked all over the chamber first, inside and out, but returned empty-handed.

"You're so scatterbrained that you can even lose things worn on your ears. I didn't see it in the Palace of Xianle, so I'll go out and search the roads. It better not have gotten lost during the parade."

Xie Lian was puzzled too, but he also didn't care that much. "Maybe. If it did, then there's no way you'll find it. If it's lost, it's lost."

Mu Qing, however, brought out the broom he usually used to sweep. He said quietly, "That pearl is too precious, we should at least try to look for it. Maybe it rolled under the bed or a shelf."

He then started sweeping, and Xie Lian responded, "Why don't we call for a few more hands to help?"

"Crowds get handsy. We don't want anyone sneaking it in their pockets before we find anything," Feng Xin said offhandedly.

Mu Qing was quietly checking under the bed, but when he heard Feng Xin's words, his face momentarily turned a shade of deathly white. He shot to his feet, and *CRACK*, the broom in his hands snapped in two. Xie Lian was startled.

Ever since they left the Palace of Divine Might, Feng Xin had been filled with complaints about Mu Qing, but he never let any of them loose. Now that he saw Mu Qing blow up first, he got angry too.

"What are you doing, breaking things so suddenly? Who pissed you off now?"

Mu Qing replied coldly, "Why don't you tell me straight what you really want to say, instead of casting shadows where there are none? I have nothing to do with the lost pearl."

Feng Xin had always been a straightforward individual, and this was the first time he heard someone accuse him of "casting shadows where there are none." He laughed from sheer anger. "Why don't you tell that to yourself?! What did I say? I didn't say you stole it, but you got all flustered. What, feeling guilty?"

Xie Lian broke out of his shock and sat up on the bed, crying "*Oh no!*" in his head. "Feng Xin, that's enough!"

A few veins popped on Mu Qing's forehead. Feng Xin really didn't think much of it and asked in confusion, "What?"

It really wasn't the right time for Xie Lian to explain, so he could only try to pacify Mu Qing. "Don't misunderstand. Feng Xin was just making offhand comments. He wasn't targeting you."

Mu Qing clenched his fists tight, then released them, and at last took control of his temper. However, his eyes were growing red, and he turned to Xie Lian, enunciating each word as he stared at him.

"You…don't keep your promises."

"No! You're wrong!" Xie Lian cried.

Mu Qing closed his mouth and took a few breaths, then cast a furious stink-eye at Feng Xin. Without another word, he dashed out the door. Xie Lian jumped off the bed and was about to give chase, but he was yanked to a stop mid-step.

"Your Highness, you haven't even put on shoes! It'd be a disgrace to go out with your hair down and in such a mess!"

"Help me stop him!" Xie Lian ordered.

“At least put on your shoes first and tie your hair,” Feng Xin said. “And leave him be. He’s always moody like this. Who knows what nerve we touched to make him go mental out of the blue?”

Mu Qing was long gone by then, and Xie Lian knew he wouldn’t be able to catch up anyway. Instead, he grabbed for a hair tie to fasten his hair in a rush.

He sighed as he did so. “He wasn’t going mental. You just said the wrong thing by accident.”

Feng Xin brought Xie Lian’s usual white training garb out of the closet and threw it at him. “What did I say wrong?”

Xie Lian replied as he slipped on his boots. “I can’t tell you. Either way, come with me to find him and tell him it was all a misunderstanding, that you weren’t accusing him of anything.”

Feng Xin frowned. “What can’t you tell me?”

Xie Lian’s lips were sealed tight. Feng Xin was growing more suspicious and thought back on Mu Qing’s furious expression just now.

He spoke up suddenly. “He didn’t actually steal from you before, did he?”

Xie Lian immediately made a vigorous shushing gesture with his hand. “No! No!”

Seeing him like this, Feng Xin was even more sure. “So that’s it! No wonder his face changed so drastically—it’s because I touched a raw nerve! When did he steal?”

“Not so loud!” Xie Lian hushed anxiously.

Feng Xin hushed his voice. “Something like that happened and you didn’t tell me?! Tell me now!”

Since Feng Xin was already suspicious, Xie Lian figured if he kept lying, it would come out either way. He had to woefully relent.

“It doesn’t really count as stealing, but…” Xie Lian sighed. “I’ll start from the beginning. Do you remember, two years ago when I first entered the Royal Holy Temple, there was a time when I lost a leaf of gold foil?”

Hearing this, Feng Xin's eyes widened, and he slapped his thigh. "It was then?!"

Three years ago, Xie Lian begged and pestered in all manner of ways until his parents finally relented and allowed him to enter the Royal Holy Temple for training before the age of twenty. A year later, when construction was completed on the Palace of Xianle, Xie Lian jubilantly entered the mountain.

When Xie Lian first moved in, the amount of luggage he brought personally wasn't particularly large. He had only two carriages full of books and two hundred treasured swords. But the queen loved her son dearly and was afraid that the ascetic life would be too quiet and austere, so later she ordered twenty servants and four large carriages full of the crown prince's most beloved trinkets to be sent to Mount Taicang. It was an impressive, dramatic sight as those caravans drove up the mountain. Included in this care package was a set of the one hundred and eight leaves that made up a Golden Foil Palace; building a palace out of gold foil was a popular game enjoyed by the Xianle nobility.

At the time, so much luxury appearing on the mountain caused a small wave of complaints. The Royal Holy Temple consisted of serious cultivators who weren't that familiar with the prince's character just yet, and although they couldn't say much publicly, there was much grumbling behind his back: Did His Highness the Crown Prince come to train or to play? What could this son of the royal family cultivate if he only came for the fun of it?

When Feng Xin heard those complaints, he had a mind to dispute them, but Xie Lian told him not to worry about it with a smile.

"It's only natural they should think that way. They'll know soon enough that I'm not here to play games. And they'll also know soon enough who among us is the true number one in this generation of trainees."

However, not long after, there was an incident.

Xie Lian was trying to send back as many of the four large carriages and servants from the queen as possible. But when he was going through the inventory, he found that in the pack of one hundred and eight leaves of gold foil, one was missing.

That set of gold foil sheets had been packed in the carriages, and once at Mount Taicang, it had never left the Palace of Xianle. If it wasn't lost on the road, then it had been stolen. Nothing was found on the road, so Xie Lian brought it up offhand to the State Preceptor.

Assuming it had been stolen, the State Preceptor was enraged that someone within the Royal Holy Temple would commit the crime of robbery under the allure of golden foil. He was determined to recover the golden leaf at all cost, and if it should be found on anyone, the punishment would be severe to the utmost. Thus, the over three thousand disciples of Mount Taicang were caught completely off guard when they had to drop what they were doing to be forced into teams to search room after room, chamber after chamber, of every single training hall.

It was a huge rigmarole that exhausted everyone. Yet unexpectedly, halfway through the search, Xie Lian abruptly changed his tune and apologized for causing everyone trouble and said he suddenly remembered that he had already lost a leaf from that set of gold foil while he was still at the imperial palace. There should only be one hundred and seven leaves total after all.

To investigate the whereabouts of the missing gold foil that night, the Royal Holy Temple went through a great deal of pain and was thrown into total confusion. So when His Highness the Crown Prince suddenly announced that they should forget the whole thing when everyone was sweating with exhaustion, it was inevitable that many of the other disciples felt aggrieved. Thus, for the longest time afterward there was talk behind his back, things like: "Well, he's the crown prince, so he gets to call the shots, and hopefully next time his memory will be better and he'll remember the important things before calling for an investigation," and so on. Feng Xin was furious listening to it, but Xie Lian still told him not to mind it and to quietly give it time.

Sure enough, after that, Xie Lian crushed all three thousand disciples completely and proved that he fully deserved the title "Number One of the Royal Holy Temple." And because he was genuinely friendly and didn't rely on his background, his reputation gradually improved amongst his peers.

Feng Xin wasn’t one to remember the petty details, so he had forgotten this had happened. Now that it was brought up again, it dawned on him, and he was both shocked and angry.

“It was Mu Qing who walked away with that gold foil?!”

“Shh!”

Xie Lian hushed him and looked around to make sure no one was around.

“That gold foil leaf fell out of the rattling carriage while coming up the mountain. Mu Qing was passing by while carrying water and found it in the bushes. He kept it under his bed and hadn’t figured out what to do with it, but that very night the State Preceptor suddenly struck, ushering everyone out to search their rooms. I didn’t know him at the time, just saw an errand boy who looked distraught. Later, while I was sitting outside, he came up to serve me tea and admitted everything. That’s how I found out.”

“Taking without telling is stealing! So you helped him bury the whole incident and told everyone that gold foil was lost in the imperial palace?”

While they were talking, Xie Lian had finished dressing and headed out the door. “That’s how it is.”

Feng Xin was going to die from rage. He followed after Xie Lian. “Your Highness, do you know just how many people talked about you behind your back when you first came to the Royal Holy Temple?”

“Keep it down,” Xie Lian said. “He really did look quite distraught at the time. Pale as a ghost. People here at the Royal Holy Temple already dislike him, so if I had said anything, his life here would be over. Our places in life are different, and we stand at different vantage points in this matter. The consequences can’t be compared.”

Just then, a few young trainees approached them and gave courteous bows, their faces full of smiles while greeting them.

“Your Highness!”

Xie Lian answered back with his own matching smile, and the two parties brushed past each other. He said to Feng Xin, “See, I told you to give it time. Now I get along with everyone, and who’d dare say anything bad about me?”

The two of them entered Mu Qing's bedchamber but didn't see a soul, so they left to keep searching.

"I already thought it strange at the time, since I hadn't heard that you'd lost any leaves at the palace," Feng Xin said. "But I can't believe you didn't tell me about this for two years! You even told me that you met him while he was sweeping!"

"He asked me later not to tell anyone," Xie Lian said. "I agreed, so of course I wouldn't tell, not even you. Since you know now, that means I went back on my word. But you mustn't tell anyone else."

"How does that even count as going back on your word?" Feng Xin said. "It's not like you told me anything, it's his own guilty conscience making him freak out that gave him away."

"No, no. You promise me right now that this stops here. Otherwise, I'll break up my relationship with you, and you'll be cursed to never find a wife!" Xie Lian threatened.

Feng Xin snorted dismissively. "You, break up with me? The day after our breakup everyone in the Kingdom of Xianle will know one thing: His Highness the Crown Prince fainted from tying his sock strings too tight while dressing—FINE! I won't say a word! Who gives a fuck about gossip anyway?"

After a pause, he still decided to comment. "I bet he thinks I'm always picking on him because I know about this gold foil business. But really, I just don't like people like him. A grown man overthinking so much of this and that; he must've suspected you told me a long time ago. Not even concubines in a harem have minds as convoluted as his. It's so annoying!"

"He's not as bad as you make it sound," Xie Lian said. "The Royal Holy Temple had never lost anything before, meaning this was the first time he took something, and at the end of the day, it was for his mother… Well, anyway, he already swore that he would never do it again, so giving him another chance wasn't wrong. And he kept his word. Besides, when that little kid fell today, if Mu Qing hadn't cooperated with me, the parade wouldn't have ended so smoothly."

Feng Xin clicked his tongue. “You’re already going down in history for only making it three rounds around the capital, so of course he won’t vex you further. Your Highness, I’m telling you, I don’t believe a word he said at the Palace of Divine Might. Who here in the Royal Holy Temple doesn’t know that when the State Preceptor plays cards, he hears and sees no one? He had to pick that time to pass on the message and stubbornly refused to clarify under whose orders he was sent. It’s like he was purposely trying to screw things up.”

Xie Lian shook his head and said gravely, “To be honest, I may have been thoughtless in regard to this. I know Mu Qing is disliked, so I originally wanted him to run more errands for me—I thought that if I let people know he’s my personal attendant, they’d be nicer to him. But I didn’t realize they were already so *nasty*. Not only did nothing get done, he got bullied too. If you think about it from another angle, you’ll find his moodiness understandable.”

Feng Xin disagreed wholeheartedly. “Why are you blaming yourself for his moodiness? You’re the crown prince! How did you end up owing anyone anything for showing them favor? Your Highness, I really don’t understand why you think so highly of him.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Feng Xin, did you know—there are so many people in this world that are nothing but rocks in my eyes.”

Feng Xin didn’t understand. Xie Lian walked with his hands clasped behind his back.

“There are rocks everywhere, but precious jades are hard to come by. When it comes to martial arts, I’ve only ever seen two people who could be called jades. One is you. The other is him.” He suddenly stopped and turned his head, eyes bright. “I genuinely think that Mu Qing is extremely gifted. How could I let such a precious jade be left to collect dust, denied from showing its beauty simply because of its background and temper?” Xie Lian looked determined. “No! I think that’s wrong. You ask why I think so highly of him? It’s the same reason I think so highly of you. Those who are destined to shine, I must let them shine. Besides, I don’t believe that goodwill brings bad returns.”

Feng Xin stopped too. After listening to Xie Lian’s speech, he scratched his head.

"As long as you know what you want, how you go about it is your business."

"Right. So. Where did Mu Qing run off to?" Xie Lian asked.

Just then, another couple of young trainees approached them, baskets in their hands, horsing around. When they saw Xie Lian, they called out to him in chorus, their voices happy.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian responded with a smile too. The trainees came up to them and thrust their baskets before the pair, saying happily, "Will Your Highness have some cherries? They've already been washed in the springs, very clean and very sweet!"

The baskets were full of small, round cherries, vivid red and looking quite adorable. Xie Lian and Feng Xin picked out a few to eat, and they were indeed juicy and sweet.

One of the young trainees asked, "When we walked over, we faintly heard Your Highness asking about Mu Qing. Are you looking for him? I think we saw him when we were passing through the cherry wood."

"Is that right? Thanks for letting me know," Xie Lian said.

Thus, the two hurried to the cherry wood. Atop Mount Taicang, other than the abundant wild maples, there were also numerous fruit trees: peaches, pears, oranges, and many others, including cherries. The fruit trees were nourished by springs, bathed in the mountain's mist and sunny dew, and bore fruits filled with spiritual energy. After offering a portion as tribute to the palace, the rest were reserved for the disciples in the temple, who could munch on them after a hard day's work. But outside the Royal Holy Temple, it would be hard to buy even a single one with a hundred gold pieces.

The cherry trees stood in many neat rows, and within the fresh, new leaves drooped dozens of cherries like red coral beads, looking delightfully enticing. Xie Lian and Feng Xin walked for a while searching for Mu Qing in the woods, but soon after, they heard quarreling voices coming from just ahead of where they were, and they automatically slowed to a stop.

Ahead of them stood four or five white-robed trainees, each with a basket in hand, appearing to have come to pick fruit. However, they weren't circling any fruit trees but rather a person. Even from afar, their hearing was keen enough that they could clearly hear the particulars of the quarrel.

One of the young men said, "No wonder there's seemed to be less fruit in the woods lately. So someone's been squatting here and stealing."

A soft voice replied, "The fruit growing on Mount Taicang can be picked by any disciple at the temple, so how is it stealing? Besides, there are hundreds, *thousands* of fruit trees here. There's no way there's less fruit by my power alone."

The voice belonged to Mu Qing. From the sleeve corner that could be seen through the crowd, it seemed he had already taken off the black demon costume and changed back into his usual plain training outfit.

The trainee humphed. "Of course, if you were only picking fruit for yourself there wouldn't be noticeably less, but you don't just pick for yourself, do you? You sneak them down the mountain for other people. Exploiting your benefits—how shameless."

Xie Lian understood now. The trainees who couldn't stand Mu Qing were picking on him again.

Mu Qing came from a very poor family. His mother, who lived in the city at the foot of the mountain, led a meager life. In the past, she made a little money from occasional seamstress work, but after her eyes deteriorated, she could no longer even do that. She had to wait for Mu Qing to bring home the money he earned running errands on the mountain. Sometimes, he would pick some fresh fruit from Mount Taicang for her to try. It wasn't anything major since there weren't any rules against it, but when said out loud, it still sounded dishonorable. To publicly mock him over it like this was even more embarrassing.

Mu Qing's voice was chilly. "Zhu-shixiong, we rarely speak, but you pick on me again and again. Yesterday, you wouldn't let me through to Sixiang Palace to pass on my message. How have I offended you?"

That young man named Zhu was indeed the trainee who had guarded the door to the Sixiang Palace, and when he heard the incident from the day before mentioned, his anger flared.

“You’re the one who carelessly messed up your job and almost botched that event, so why are you blaming me? You should blame yourself for acting all secretive and making people think you’re up to no good. If you had just said outright what you were doing, nothing would’ve happened. Thanks to you, His Highness almost messed up his important duties, and I got yelled at by the State Preceptor!”

As he griped, he threw the basket on the ground and motioned for everyone to surround and attack.

Xie Lian couldn’t watch anymore and shouted, “Stop!”

The trainees were all shocked at the sound of his voice. They turned their heads and called out, “Your Highness!”

Xie Lian and Feng Xin approached. By then, Zhu-shixiong had already grabbed Mu Qing by the collar and pushed him against the trunk of a tree, though the brawl had not yet started. If they really did fight, Mu Qing would’ve gained the upper hand, even one against twenty. Nevertheless, if he wanted to stay at the Royal Holy Temple, he knew he must never raise his fist.

Xie Lian smiled. “What’s everyone doing?”

Zhu-shixiong was a decent, plain-looking young man who looked up to the crown prince. Hearing Xie Lian’s inquiry, he froze and quickly let go of Mu Qing.

“Um, this, we were…”

Xie Lian continued to smile. “Although I don’t know why everyone is quarreling, Mu Qing is my personal attendant. Anything he does is generally under my command. I didn’t realize offense would be taken if I had him pick some fruit for me?”

The trainees all bowed. “No, no! So it was His Highness who asked him to come! We misunderstood!”

On the side, Mu Qing leaned against the tree, at first taken aback to hear Xie Lian say he’d come under His Highness’s command. He quickly fixed his collar, lowered his head, and didn’t speak. Cold sweat was rolling down the backs of the trainees as they profoundly apologized to Xie Lian, then to Mu Qing, and finally picked up their baskets and hurried away, escaping the cherry wood.

Xie Lian saw the basket Mu Qing had brought on the ground and bent to pick it up, passing it to him. “Want some help?”

Mu Qing didn’t take the basket, but he raised his head and watched Xie Lian with an unreadable expression for a moment before he spoke. “Your Highness.”

“What is it?” Xie Lian asked.

“Why must you always show up at times like these?”

Xie Lian only made a sound of confusion, but Feng Xin grew upset. “What do you mean? Is it wrong to come and save you?”

Mu Qing cast him a glance and took the basket.

Just then, Feng Xin stiffened his neck and said rigidly, “Listen up! What happened before was my fault! I didn’t mean to accuse you of anything, I just made some offhand comments. There’s no need for you to overthink it or suspect anything. I don’t care for anyone other than His Highness, and I’m not interested in gossip. That’s all I have to say, so stop being so difficult!”

“PFFFT!” At first, Xie Lian thought his tone was too aggressive, but toward the end, it became strangely funny. Mu Qing glared at Feng Xin, and Xie Lian waved his hand. “All right, all right. Everything Feng Xin said is true. Let’s just forget what happened. Nothing’s happened.”

A moment later, Mu Qing said begrudgingly, “I’ll look for that red coral pearl again later. Maybe it was dropped on the street.”

Xie Lian thought it might be a bad idea to appear that he didn’t care, so he replied, “All right. If you have the time, then thank you. But if it was dropped in the streets, somebody will have picked it up by now.”

It seemed Mu Qing had nothing more to say, so he collected the bunches of cherries that had fallen on the ground and put them back in his basket. He hadn’t picked that many in the first place. As he moved to leave the woods, Xie Lian saw many more enticing fresh cherries and casually picked a bunch, dropping them into his basket. Mu Qing was slightly taken aback.

Xie Lian said, “Next time you want to pick fruit for your mother, just say you’re picking them by my command and no one will say anything. The State Preceptor told me to return to the palace for a few days, so I plan on leaving tomorrow. Why don’t you make a trip down the mountain too? But let’s head back for today.”

It took a while, but at last Mu Qing muttered in a quiet voice, “Thank you, Your Highness.”

The next day, Xie Lian descended the mountain with Feng Xin and Mu Qing in tow.

The moment they reached the foot of the mountain, they saw a shining, golden carriage right outside the huge mountain gates. A young man, dressed in a collared brocade top with a whip in hand, was lying in the front seat of the carriage; his legs were crossed, and he looked smug and important. The second he saw Xie Lian exiting the gates, he leapt to his feet and ran toward him in a mad dash, shouting in obvious joy.

“Cousin Crown Prince!”

This youth was of course Qi Rong. Only he would have the free time to wait aimlessly for Xie Lian at the foot of Mount Taicang.

He skipped over and happily exclaimed, “My patience has finally paid off!”

Xie Lian grinned and ruffled his hair, laughing. “Did Qi Rong grow taller again? How did you know I was returning to the palace today?”

Qi Rong giggled. “I didn’t. I just waited and knew you’d have to come out sooner or later. I refused to believe I couldn’t catch you.”

“Free, aren’t you?” Xie Lian said helplessly. “Are you studying properly? What about sword practice? If Mother asks me to check your studies again, I won’t make excuses for you.”

Qi Rong blinked, his eyes shifty, and suddenly he jumped up and down. “Never mind all that! Look at my new carriage! Cousin Crown Prince, come inside, ride my carriage back to the palace!”

He grabbed Xie Lian’s hand and pulled him to the carriage, but Xie Lian could sense danger.

“You’re driving?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing approached too. Technically, servants should sit at the front, but Qi Rong's face fell immediately, and he cracked the whip in his hand.

"I asked Cousin Crown Prince to get on, but I didn't invite you two. You think I'd let lowlifes touch my golden carriage? Get the hell outta here!"

Xie Lian quietly snapped, "Qi Rong!"

Feng Xin had met Qi Rong many times before and already knew his foul mouth and vulgar, condescending attitude. But Mu Qing had never entered the palace before and so had naturally never gotten the chance to meet Prince Xiao Jing. Qi Rong was feeling extremely aggrieved, but seeing Xie Lian about to walk away, he painfully and begrudgingly condescended to let the two shitty lowlifes board his precious golden carriage.

However, as soon as they entered the carriage, all three of them immediately regretted their decision. Qi Rong drove like a madman, whip in his hand lashing nonstop, screaming who-knows-what. The white horse shrieked in shock, and they thrashed down the streets with wheels spinning frantically. Qi Rong refused to stop no matter how much Xie Lian screamed for him to do so. They almost crashed into a number of pedestrians and stalls, and it was thanks only to Feng Xin and Mu Qing—who sat at the front and grabbed the reins to guide the horse—that this berserk journey did not cost at least twenty lives.

When they finally reached the palace and the carriage slowed down, Xie Lian, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing all breathed a sigh of relief at the same time. Xie Lian wiped away his cold sweat. The other two had been lashed by Qi Rong's whip a number of times, and their hands were covered in welts.

Qi Rong rose to his feet, one leg stepping on the white horse's behind. He proclaimed proudly, "What do you think, Cousin Crown Prince? I drive pretty well, right?"

Xie Lian dismounted the carriage and replied, "I'm going to tell Father and Mother to confiscate your carriage."

"WHAT?!" Qi Rong cried in shock.

Regarding Xianle culture: First, they loved gold. Second, they loved precious stones. Third, they loved beauties. Fourth, they loved music. And fifth, they loved art. The Palace of Xianle was thus the most distinguished place, where all that they loved coalesced. Traversing the large courtyard, walking down the crimson hallway, not everything was gilded or built of jade—there were also masterpiece paintings hung all around, for example, and soft music wafted in the air. It created the illusion of paradise.

The palace was Xie Lian’s home, the place where he grew up. Feng Xin was chosen to be his personal guard at the age of fourteen and had long since gotten used to these sights. However, it was Mu Qing’s first time seeing such a building, and he couldn’t help but be awed. Yet the more awed he was, the more careful he became, and the more he didn’t dare to allow others to sense what he was feeling, didn’t dare take a wrong step.

Xie Lian went to meet with the queen straightaway. She was resting at Qifeng Palace, leaning on a small tea table and tasting new brews. She had already received the message that the crown prince had returned, and with eyes crescent-shaped in joy, she extended both arms before her son had even come near.

She said, “Finally willing to come home and see your mom?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stood guard outside. Xie Lian entered the chamber with Qi Rong in tow, and he reached out to take his mother’s hands when he approached.

“Didn’t I just visit two months ago?”

The queen grumbled, “What a heartless child. Even Rong-er knows to keep an old woman like me company, but here you are, sounding all self-righteous when you haven’t come home in two months.”

Xie Lian chuckled. “And how is Mother old? You look no older than a teenager! It’s like we’re of the same generation.”

The queen was very pleased hearing these words of praise. Even if she had a son as old as Xie Lian, because of her status and wealth as a member of the noble Min clan and wife of the King of Xianle, she was very well maintained and still looked the part of a noble beauty. Still, the word that left her lips was a light admonishment. “Flatterer.”

Xie Lian glanced at the small tea table and saw a jaded cup, its contents emitting a strange fragrance. He curiously asked "What's this?" as he picked it up.

But the queen warned, "Don't drink it! That's not something you should drink!"

Xie Lian was curious. "Why can't I drink this?"

The queen reached for the small jaded cup and took it from him, poured a bit of its contents on her handkerchief, and pressed it gently to her face a few times.

"Mount Taicang recently sent a batch of fresh fruit. I don't like cherries, but there's a method of making them into paste for facials, so I squeezed some for fun. There's not much use for it and I was about to have it thrown out, so you can't possibly drink it!"

Xie Lian smiled as he listened but suddenly recalled the events of the previous day. There were very few times in a year where Mu Qing's mother could taste cherries, and Mu Qing himself was bullied just for trying to pick some. It was something of a sensitive topic, and Xie Lian was afraid Mu Qing would be uncomfortable listening to it, so he smiled and changed the subject.

"Then do you have anything that I could eat?"

The queen chuckled. "The way you make it sound, people will think I starve you. But you've been a picky eater ever since you were young, I can't plump you up. You've gotten so thin since you went to the mountain. Today you'll eat whatever I tell you to, with no fussing."

Mother and son conversed for a while, and the queen asked about the incident during the Heavenly Procession with great concern.

"By the State Preceptor's report, it sounds serious. What's going to happen? Will you be punished?"

Xie Lian didn't have the chance to answer before Qi Rong cut in.

"Hmph! That wasn't Cousin Crown Prince's fault. He wasn't the one who fell off the wall. If anyone must be punished, it should be that little non-croaker!"

What the heck is a "little non-croaker"? Xie Lian thought. Before he could correct Qi Rong, however, the queen simply laughed.

Then, she happened to notice the two outside the manor and asked, "Who's the child next to Feng Xin? It's the first time I've seen another person by your side."

Xie Lian replied cheerfully, "That's Mu Qing. He's the one who played the demon on stage yesterday."

Hearing this, anger flashed across Qi Rong's face.

The queen said, "Really? Have him come in so I can see his face. Feng Xin can come in too."

Thus, Feng Xin and Mu Qing entered the chamber and knelt before the queen. She took her time looking over Mu Qing and said to Xie Lian, "I thought he fought rather well yesterday, a fairly respectable child. Looking at his face, you'd think he'd be a gentle minister—no one would suspect he could be so tenacious wielding a saber."

Xie Lian grinned. "Right? I think he's quite good too."

Qi Rong, on the other hand, commented coolly, "Oh? The demon yesterday was him?"

Xie Lian heard his tone and felt dread. Sure enough, the next second, Qi Rong suddenly exploded. He snatched the small, jaded cup from the little tea table and swung it right at Mu Qing's face.

"Here! Your reward!"

Fortunately, Xie Lian was faster. He smacked Qi Rong's hand, forcing him to drop the cup so the splash didn't make it to Mu Qing's face. Xie Lian pulled him back by the collar.

"Qi Rong, what are you doing?!"

Even as he was seized, Qi Rong still ranted and raved. "Cousin, I'm helping you discipline an impudent servant! Before you showed up yesterday, he sure was enjoying himself, hogging the limelight! Who do you think you are? The star of the Heavenly Procession? Gonna overthrow the heavens too?!"

The queen was stunned. "Rong-er, what…what are you doing?"

Mu Qing’s face was spared the splash, but his clothes weren’t. Because the queen hadn’t given him leave to do otherwise, he stayed kneeling on the floor, his face ghastly pale and gloomy. Xie Lian passed Qi Rong to Feng Xin.

“Don’t let him hit anyone.”

Feng Xin only used one hand to restrain Qi Rong, but Qi Rong kicked and punched, spitting as he shouted.

“And who do you think *you* are to have the damned nerve to touch me so casually?!”

Xie Lian could feel his head throbbing. “Qi Rong, you’re getting more and more out of control!” He then turned to the queen. “Mother, I forgot to mention something. Please confiscate his golden carriage.”

Shocked, Qi Rong yelled, “NO! NO! WHY? THAT’S YIMU’S BIRTHDAY GIFT TO ME!”

“Even if it is, it must be confiscated,” Xie Lian said. “We almost caused a disturbance in the streets! You’d best not touch it again until you learn how to drive properly.”

The queen made a noise of surprise and asked, “Disturbance? What disturbance?”

Xie Lian recounted the crazy saga of Qi Rong’s driving. Qi Rong was furious, his eyes rimmed in red.

“COUSIN CROWN PRINCE IS WRONG! I DIDN’T RUN OVER A SINGLE PERSON!”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “That’s because we stopped you!”

Qi Rong struggled out of Feng Xin’s hands and ran out of Qifeng Palace in a mad fit, not turning back even when the queen called out to him.

She said helplessly, “I’ll talk to him tomorrow about confiscating his carriage.” She sighed. “That child has wanted a carriage for the longest time, so when his birthday came around and he still desperately wanted it, I gave it to him. Who knew it’d turn out like this? Had I known, I wouldn’t have done it.”

“Why must he have a carriage?” Xie Lian wondered.

“He said it’s so he can go to Mount Taicang any time to bring you back to the palace,” the queen replied.

Xie Lian fell silent, learning that at the end of the day, it was a gesture of goodwill. After a moment, he spoke. “It’d be better to instead find him a good teacher and restrain that temper. He can’t keep going on like this.”

The queen sighed. “And what teacher can restrain him? He only ever listens to you. And we could hardly have him go to the mountain to cultivate with you. The State Preceptor would die before taking him on as a disciple.”

Xie Lian found the idea both hilarious and horrifying. He shook his head. “With a temper like that, if he entered the Royal Holy Temple, he would cause havoc for sure.”

Both mother and son were deeply troubled by this, but they didn’t have any ideas, so they let it go for the time being. That evening, after having seen his parents and caught up, Xie Lian rose to leave the palace.

It was a well-known fact that the crown prince was obsessed with cultivation, and ever since he entered the Royal Holy Temple, he visited his parents less and less. The king didn’t comment much on the matter, but the queen was always reluctant to see him go. After leaving the palace, Xie Lian casually strolled around the imperial capital accompanied by Mu Qing to visit his home as he’d suggested the day before.

The tall, opulent red gates and the impoverished slums were only a street away from each other. Mu Qing’s former home was tucked into a dark alley off the most bustling area of the imperial capital.

The three of them had just turned into the alley when five or six children in rags surrounded them. “Gege! Gege is back!”

Xie Lian was a little confused at first, wondering why they would call a stranger “gege.” But then he discovered that the “gege” they were calling to wasn’t him but rather Mu Qing. The children called out to him sweetly, but Mu Qing ignored them.

“There’s nothing this time. Don’t ‘gege’ me so easily.” His face was wooden, but his voice wasn’t cold. He turned to Xie Lian. “Don’t mind them, Your Highness, they’re just kids from the block.”

Still, this group of children obviously knew him well, so they were clearly used to playing with him and weren’t scared at all. They giggled and surrounded them, their dirty little hands extended, begging for treats from Mu Qing. In the end, Mu Qing reached for the gem-like red cherries in his bag and handed them out.

Feng Xin was astonished at this sight, as if Mu Qing doing anything like this was nothing short of a miracle. It was no wonder, since Mu Qing’s pretty-boy face always looked extremely selfish and coldhearted; he seemed like the type that, seeing someone die from starvation on the streets, would still keep a tight grip on his own food.

Xie Lian, on the other hand, wasn’t surprised at all.

At first, he also wanted to find something to give to the children. But he didn’t usually carry sweets on his person, and having Feng Xin give coins would be too much like dismissing beggars, so Xie Lian didn’t think it would be appropriate.

Suddenly, there was a *boom* and a cacophony of galloping noises from the main street, the long shrieking whinny of a horse, and people screaming.

The three of them stopped, then Xie Lian rushed out of the alley. The main street was in chaos; stalls toppled and people on the ground—it was total confusion. The pedestrians were all fleeing, and red apples and yellow pears rolled all over the ground. But before he could figure out what was happening, he heard the crazed laughter of a young man.

“OUT OF MY WAY, GET OUT OF MY WAY! IF YOU’RE THAT BLIND, I DON’T CARE IF YOU GET TRAMPLED!”

Feng Xin swore. “It’s Qi Rong again!”

Sure enough, Qi Rong stood atop his magnificent golden carriage looking malicious. He was lashing his whip wildly, the white horse howling from the strikes.

“Stop him!” Xie Lian shouted.

The golden carriage whooshed by them, and Feng Xin acknowledged with an “Understood!” before charging on ahead. Xie Lian was about to go check for any wounded among all the toppled stalls and knocked-over pedestrians left in the wake of Qi Rong’s mad ride, when suddenly he noticed something wrong. He whipped his head around and saw that there was something being dragged along behind the golden carriage, attached with a long, thick hemp rope. At the end of the rope was a large sack that appeared to have something struggling inside.

It looked like there was a person in that sack.

At that moment, Xie Lian could only feel his blood run cold. The next second, he rushed forward.

From all the whipping, that white horse was galloping like it was running for its life, furiously spinning the wheels of the carriage. Feng Xin was trying to hold the horse back but probably wouldn’t be able to stop it immediately. Xie Lian raced up to the carriage in only a few steps, unsheathed his sword, and struck down. The rope snapped in two, and the sack dropped to the ground, rolled, and came to a stop.

Xie Lian bent forward to inspect it. The sack had been dragged for who knows how long and was torn from the scraping. It was extremely dirty and drenched in blood; it looked like a bag for a dead body.

Another swing from his sword, and the rope tied around the opening was cut. He opened the bag, and there was indeed someone inside. What’s more, it was a young child!

Xie Lian ripped open the entire sack. The child within was curled in a ball, hugging his head tightly. His filthy clothes were covered both in giant footprints and fresh blood. Even his hair was matted with blood. He was a mess, and it was obvious he had been severely beaten, so badly that he didn’t even look human anymore. Judging by his size, he was only seven or eight, and a tiny creature. He was shaking like a layer of his skin had been forcibly peeled off. Truly incredible that he was still alive after such a violent beating and being dragged through the streets!

Xie Lian reached out a hand to feel his neck and found that his pulse wasn’t too weak. He sighed a breath of relief. He immediately picked up that small body, then turned around and barked a furious order.

"Feng Xin! Arrest Qi Rong!"

He could not believe that something like this could happen in the Kingdom of Xianle. Under the light of day, on the main street, a member of the nobility stuffed a live human in a sack to be dragged behind a horse carriage! If he hadn't seen and stopped it, this small child would've been dragged to death this day!

From some distance away came the sounds of whinnying and the angry roars of Qi Rong, and soon after, Feng Xin yelled back, "He's been stopped!"

Xie Lian rushed toward them just in time to hear Qi Rong howl in rage.

"YOU DAMNED AUDACIOUS LOWLY SERVANT, YOU DARE HURT ME?! WHO GAVE YOU THE BALLS?!"

Turned out, Feng Xin couldn't stop the horse, so he tried to snatch the reins instead. Of course, Qi Rong wouldn't let him, so the two pulled back and forth, and in a moment of carelessness, Feng Xin bumped him and pushed him off the carriage. Qi Rong fell to the ground and rolled a few times, scraping his knees. Seeing that he was surrounded by onlookers, he felt nothing but rage and embarrassment.

However, Xie Lian cut in. "I did!"

Qi Rong opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before finally crying, "Cousin Crown Prince!"

Xie Lian said angrily, "Look at what you've done! Qi Rong, I really…"

Just then, he felt the child in his arms jerk. He had loosened the hands hugging his head and was peeking up at Xie Lian from the gap between his elbows.

Xie Lian immediately restrained his anger and lowered his head to soothe him in a gentle voice. "How do you feel? Do you feel pain anywhere especially?"

The child was amazingly still alert, not unconscious from pain, nor frozen in shock. He shook his head. Xie Lian noticed that what little of his face was visible was bleeding, and he was about to check for other head injuries, but the child firmly clutched half of his face with his hands, stubbornly refusing to show him.

Xie Lian coaxed, “Don’t be afraid, everything’s fine. I only want to check your injuries.”

The child, however, pressed his hands down harder, revealing only one large obsidian eye, looking panicked. But this panic didn’t seem like it stemmed from a fear that he would get beaten but rather that something would be discovered.

Looking at this little face, half-covered with only one eye to be seen, Xie Lian suddenly realized he might’ve seen this child somewhere. He squinted as he thought.

Qi Rong saw his upset face and explained, “Cousin Crown Prince, that little non-croaker ruined your grand ceremony yesterday, so I avenged you. Don’t worry, I was careful, he won’t die.”

Sure enough, the child held in his arms was the one who fell from the city wall during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession the day before!

No wonder Xie Lian thought he looked familiar. This little child hadn’t even changed; he was still wearing the same outfit as the day before, but because of all the beating and dragging, he was filthier and the clothes looked nothing like they had yesterday. He didn’t even look like the same person.

Xie Lian couldn’t hold back his anger anymore. “Who told you to avenge me?! It has nothing to do with this child—it wasn’t his fault!”

Qi Rong justified, “Of course it’s his fault. If not for him, you wouldn’t have been scolded by the State Preceptor!”

This ruckus was getting out of hand, and the crowd watching was growing, the onlookers whispering to each other. Just then, Mu Qing approached, and Qi Rong pointed his whip at him, expression laced with hostility.

“And you! You lowly servant. I can tell this one doesn’t know his place just from the look of him. If you don’t discipline him, sooner or later he’s going to overthrow you and step on you, his master. I helped you discipline him, but you turned around and defended him instead, and told on me too. Now Yifu and Yimu are not only ignoring that I did it for *you*, they're even gonna confiscate my golden carriage! Cousin, that was my birthday gift! I've wanted it for over two years!!"

Mu Qing gave Qi Rong an unreadable, sweeping look. Xie Lian laughed from sheer rage.

"I don't need your help, not like this. Are you really avenging me? Or are you avenging yourself?"

"…Cousin, why would you say that to me?" Qi Rong asked, confused. "And what have I done wrong in being on your side?"

Xie Lian couldn't talk sense with him. "Qi Rong, listen here. From now on, you're not allowed to touch this child. Not even a finger! Do you hear me?!"

Just then, Xie Lian felt a pull on his neck. He was wrapped up in a fit of anger, so it startled him. He looked down and saw that the young child had buried his face in his chest, his arms tightly circled around Xie Lian's neck. Xie Lian felt him shake uncontrollably and thought he was in pain.

He asked hurriedly, "What's wrong?"

That child was covered all over in mud, grime, and blood—filthy and unkempt. It all smeared onto Xie Lian's white robe, but Xie Lian didn't mind at all. He gently patted the child's back to comfort him and soothed him in a low voice.

"I'll take you to the doctors right now."

The child didn't respond, but he hugged Xie Lian even tighter. He held on with a death grip and wouldn't let go, as if he were holding on to a lifeline.

Qi Rong could see that Xie Lian wasn't going to acknowledge his goodwill, his heart solely with outsiders. And when he saw that kid sullying Xie Lian's robes with bloody, muddy smears, his anger flared. He raised the whip to lash the back of the child's head.

Feng Xin was standing to the side, and in a split-second, his leg flew out and kicked Qi Rong right on the arm.

There was a loud *CRACK*, and Qi Rong screamed. The whip fell to the ground, and his right arm dropped limply at an abnormal angle. He stood there frozen in disbelief, and it was a while before he slowly raised his head, glaring at Feng Xin, enunciating each word…

“You…DARE…*BREAK MY ARM!*”

The words chilled them to the bone. It was only after he kicked that Feng Xin realized what he had done, and his face changed, but Mu Qing’s face changed more. It was one thing for them to detest Qi Rong behind his back, but for a personal guard to transgress this badly and accidentally break the arm of royalty, that was something completely different!

Xie Lian had his hands full with that child when it happened, and the path behind him was packed with onlookers—dodging the blow wouldn’t be easy, but he would have managed it fine given the chance. But Qi Rong had come at him with such aggression and so little warning that Feng Xin moved too fast without thinking, and Xie Lian didn’t have the chance to stop him. Now everything was in even more of an uproar, and Xie Lian didn’t have time to think. His clothes were getting soaked with blood—if they delayed any longer, the child might die right there.

Xie Lian made a split-second decision, inhaled deeply, and shouted in a clear voice, “Everyone, if you were pulled into this incident today, please record any damages or losses. I will take all responsibility without fail!”

Then, he turned to Feng Xin and Mu Qing.

“I need to save the child first. Take Qi Rong away, and don’t let him cause any more havoc outside.”

Done with his instructions, Xie Lian ran toward the palace with the child in his arms. Feng Xin heard the command, his expression back to normal, and he picked up the raging Qi Rong before following Xie Lian.

The soldiers guarding the palace gates thought it was strange to see the crown prince racing back, having left such a short while ago, but of course they didn’t dare obstruct him. Thus, Xie Lian ran straight for the imperial medical office and made Feng Xin and Mu Qing wait outside the door with Qi Rong under arrest while he entered the infirmary alone.

The crown prince rarely returned to the palace and rarely gave orders, so the imperial doctors naturally rushed over with due haste.

Xie Lian placed the young child in a chair and said, “Thanks in advance, everyone. This child was beaten by several adults, stuffed in a sack, and dragged through the streets. Please check if there are any head injuries first, that’s the most important thing.”

Neither royal nor noble had ever brought in a wild, dirty babe for them to heal before, but the imperial medical team also knew they needed to do whatever they were told to, and they acknowledged Xie Lian’s direction with a chorus of “yes, yes, yes.”

One of them said, “Put your hands down first, little one.”

Although the child had been docile in Xie Lian’s arms up until now, he started struggling then and firmly covered the right side of his face, refusing to drop his hands. No matter how competent the imperial doctors were, if the patient would not cooperate, there was nothing they could do. The doctors looked to Xie Lian.

“Your Highness, how…?”

Xie Lian raised a hand. “He’s probably afraid of strangers. It’s fine, let me.”

The child was sitting in a chair and Xie Lian couldn’t be level with his eyes, so he bent forward and tilted his head.

“What’s your name?”

The child’s large eye stared at him intently, his obsidian-black pupil reflecting a snow-white silhouette. This gaze, if it must be described, was exactly as Feng Xin had said—possessed by the devil. It shouldn’t be the gaze of a child.

It was a while before the child bowed his head.

“…Hong…”

His voice was tiny and soft, a little mumbled. It was like he didn’t want to tell or that he was slightly embarrassed. Xie Lian only sort of heard the word “hong,” the color red, then asked another question.

“How old are you?”

“Ten,” the child replied.

Xie Lian was only asking offhand, hoping to lower his guard, but hearing the child's shy response of "ten," he was taken aback. *I thought he was only seven or eight, but he's ten? This child is extremely malnourished and emaciated.*

After a pause, Xie Lian smiled softly. "The doctors will see to your wounds now. Don't be afraid and lower your hands, okay?"

That child heard but hesitantly shook his head.

"Why not?" Xie Lian asked.

He was silent for a long time before replying, "Ugly."

His response was just that one word, and no matter how Xie Lian coaxed, he refused to remove his hands. Xie Lian promised that he wouldn't think him ugly, that he wouldn't look, but not even turning around would do the trick. What obstinance at such a young age! Without much choice, the imperial doctors could only ask him a few questions, have him recognize a number of fingers, make sure he didn't feel faint or have any headaches, check that he was perfectly conscious of what he saw and what he thought, and attend to his physical wounds.

As the imperial doctors worked, they all appeared confused, clicking their tongues in awe. Xie Lian stood guard on the side, and hearing their sounds of wonder, he asked, "How is he, everyone?"

One of the imperial doctors asked, in spite of himself, "Your Highness, did this child really get beaten and dragged along the roads in a sack?"

Xie Lian was speechless for a second. "Why would that be false?"

The imperial doctor replied, "If that really is the case, then… amazing. I have never seen anyone so tenacious. He has five broken ribs and a broken leg, and many other injuries big and small. But despite all of that, he's remained conscious this entire time and can even hold a conversation while sitting upright. Even adults would find that difficult, never mind a ten-year-old child!"

Hearing how severe the injuries were, Xie Lian inwardly became even more furious at Qi Rong. He looked at that child and saw that he was sitting there on his chair as if he felt no pain, stealing glimpses at Xie Lian with that large, obsidian-black left eye. When he noticed he'd been caught staring by Xie Lian, he immediately turned his head away.

Seeing this, for some reason Xie Lian thought the boy was both silly and pitiful. He asked, "Will his injuries heal?"

One of the imperial doctors wrapped new layers of bandages around the child's head and replied, "Not a problem."

Only then did Xie Lian relax. He nodded. "Thank you for all your hard work."

Just then, an attendant entered to notify them of the imminent arrival of His Majesty the King and the queen. Each of the imperial doctors immediately stood up and exited the imperial medical office to greet them.

Xie Lian moved the child to the bed and said, "Lie down and get some rest."

It occurred to him that the child was afraid of strangers, and all the people who would be crowding in shortly might scare him. So Xie Lian lowered the bedside curtains before rising to his feet too.

A number of guards and attendants escorted the king and the queen as they walked into the hall. The queen's face was pale.

"My dear child, why did you return so suddenly when you just left the palace? Were you hurt outside?"

"Please be at ease, Mother," Xie Lian said. "I wasn't hurt. It was someone else who was injured."

Just then, Qi Rong cried out from the corner, "Yimu, save me!"

Only then did the queen notice Qi Rong to the side, firmly held by Feng Xin and under arrest, and she was shocked. She was focused on the well-being of her son and had completely ignored everything else, but now that she saw, she asked, "Rong-er, what happened?"

The king, on the other hand, knitted his brows slightly. "Feng Xin, why are you holding Prince Xiao Jing like a criminal?"

When His Majesty arrived, Feng Xin should've bowed in greeting like Mu Qing and all the others, but because he had Qi Rong in hand and couldn't release him, he was put in an awkward situation.

Xie Lian spoke up. “It was under my command.”

Qi Rong held up his right arm. “Yimu, my arm is broken.”

The queen hadn’t had the chance to sympathize before Xie Lian cut in harshly. “You broke an arm, but what about that child?”

“What child?” the king asked.

“A ten-year-old child,” Xie Lian answered. “Powerless, vulnerable, and frail in stature. Qi Rong sent his subordinates to beat him. If not for the child’s tenacity, he would’ve been beaten to death on the spot!”

Qi Rong looked as if he had just heard a joke, his eyes widening. “A powerless, vulnerable ten-year-old child? Frail? Cousin, you don’t know just how vicious, how savage, how spunky that little non-croaker was; he only pretends to be pathetic in front of you. I called for five or six guys, and they still couldn’t catch the brat. He thrashed and bit them until they were bloodied all over. If he hadn’t angered me so, why else would I have dragged him behind my horse carriage?”

Hearing this, both the king and the queen’s faces fell. Xie Lian drew in a deep breath and shouted, “Enough! Do you think what you’ve done is impressive?!”

Qi Rong wasn’t one to shy away from the limelight. He was so arrogant and ostentatious that there was no way the citizens of the capital hadn’t seen him. And after they saw, there was no reason he wouldn’t become the talk of every dinner-table conversation in the city.

The king gave the queen a look, appearing a little grim. “Take Prince Xiao Jing away. Doctor, see to his arm. The golden carriage will be permanently confiscated. You will be confined to your palace and reflect on your actions for a month without release.”

The guard behind him immediately acknowledged the order and moved forward to take Qi Rong. Only then did Feng Xin let go. Qi Rong, however, no longer cared and humphed.

“Take it, take it. I already knew today would be my last chance to drive it.”

The queen sighed sadly, hearing that he had no remorse or repenting heart. Xie Lian spoke up.

"It would seem that with only a month of detention to reflect, he will still do this again. There needs to be stricter discipline."

Qi Rong was taken aback and stammered angrily, "Cousin Crown Prince, you…" But then he switched gears. "Fine. I admit it, this time it was my fault. No matter how His Majesty punishes me, Qi Rong has no complaints." His next words changed the argument's direction. "But shouldn't Cousin Crown Prince's servant also be punished? Yifu, Yimu, my arm was broken by that Feng Xin, you know!"

Hearing this, the king instantly shifted his gaze to Feng Xin, looking outraged. Feng Xin bowed his head, and Mu Qing imperceptibly shuffled two steps away.

The king berated him coldly. "Feng Xin, you are the crown prince's bodyguard. The crown prince treats you well and regards you highly, but have you forgotten your place? What is this arrogance?! Your duty is to serve His Highness. Is this how you serve him? You dare raise a hand against the crown prince's cousin, Prince Xiao Jing?"

At those words, Feng Xin was ready to kneel, but Xie Lian stopped him.

"No need to kneel."

Feng Xin obeyed Xie Lian's commands first and foremost; even under the king's orders, his priority was His Highness, and so he instantly straightened again. Seeing this, the king grew even more displeased.

"It's true that Feng Xin broke Qi Rong's arm, but the reason was to protect his master," Xie Lian said. "Besides, Qi Rong was at fault first, not Feng Xin, so why must he kneel?"

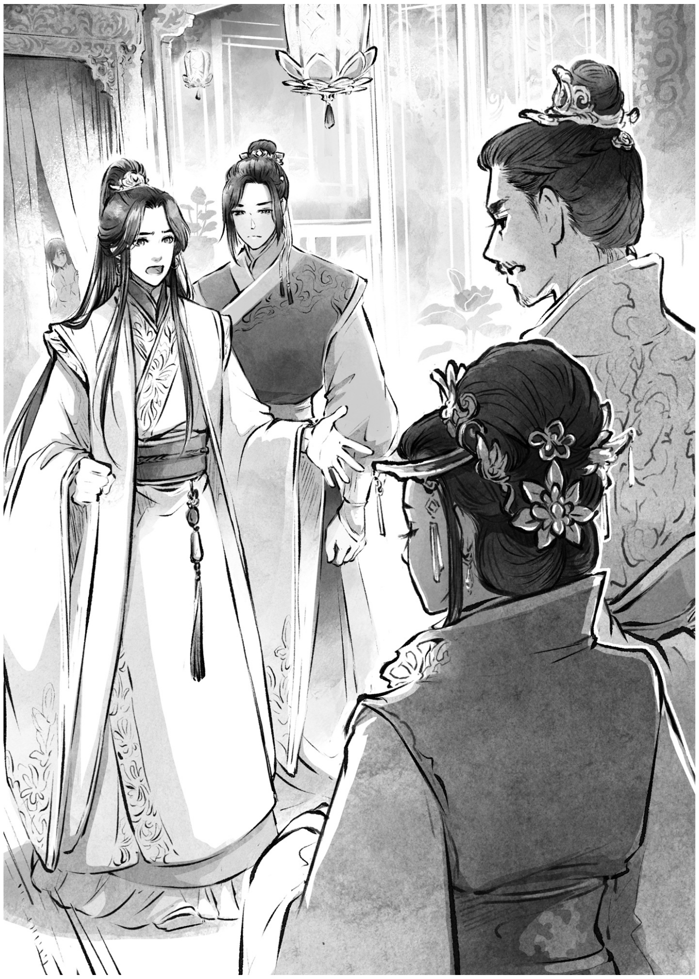
"It doesn't matter," the king said. "Either way, he has offended Prince Xiao Jing. There's a difference between masters and servants, a distinction of superior versus inferior. If I, the king, were to make him kneel—or even if I punished him with one hundred lashes—there would be nothing inappropriate about it."

Although the king wasn't as affectionate toward Qi Rong as the queen was, Qi Rong was still nevertheless a part of the royal household. He was never to be disobeyed or offended.

Qi Rong knew this very well and said with a sidelong glance, “No need for a flogging punishment. He belongs to Cousin Crown Prince; I don’t want to make things difficult. As long as he breaks his own arm and kowtows before me three times, I can let this go.”

The king nodded slowly to accept the decision. However, Xie Lian interjected.

“If you must punish Feng Xin, then you must punish me first. He’s my servant. First of all, he’s done nothing wrong, and second of all, if he was at fault, it was still done under my orders. I will take punishment on his behalf.”



Hearing him, rage flashed across the king’s face.

By and large, all fathers and sons in the world must go through this change. When the son is young, he idolizes his father as the greatest hero on earth, his own personal role model, and his worship is clear. However, when the son matures to a certain age, he starts to question everything his father does. This can even brew revulsion, until, in the end, neither side will acknowledge the other.

Xie Lian’s fundamental objective for entering Mount Taicang was to improve his martial arts and search for the direction of his heart. However, he was never attached to a particular place where he trained, nor his identity.

The so-called “Dao” of cultivation meant exactly what it said: “to walk the path.” As long as one’s heart was set on the path with a singular mind, then training could be done anywhere. He didn’t need to follow any dictated norms, nor enter the Royal Holy Temple. But there was another reason why Xie Lian had begged and pestered them to let him train on Mount Taicang, and that was because he didn’t really get along with his father.

As the esteemed Crown Prince of Xianle, the moment Xie Lian was born, the King of Xianle had already drawn out every detail of the path of his life, neat and orderly. It was all right when he was still young. A child had few worries, and Xie Lian only needed his parents to build gold foil palaces with him, to frolic and play. As the years went by, Xie Lian saw more and more that his father wasn’t only a father, but also the ruler of a kingdom, and many of their beliefs and actions no longer agreed. For example, the so-called Royal Authority was one of the things Xie Lian loathed.

If they couldn’t agree, then it was best to stay far away. Every time he returned to the palace, he spent time conversing merrily with his mother, but he never had any heart-to-hearts with his father. Neither of the two ever took the initiative to talk to each other, and it was the queen who always mediated between them.

Father and son had maintained this stalemate for many months, and now, with Xie Lian stubbornly refusing to back down, the king said, “Very well. Take his place, if you must. Let’s see if you can actually withstand it!”

“Of course I can!” Xie Lian retorted.

The queen saw the two of them butting heads again and anxiously intervened, “Why must it be like this?”

Just then, Feng Xin, who hadn’t spoken a word, suddenly raised his left arm and struck down on his right. There was a loud *CRACK*. The crowd was startled and looked toward the sound, and saw that his right arm was drooping limply, exactly like Qi Rong’s. Xie Lian was both shocked and furious.

“Feng Xin!”

Cold sweat rolled down Feng Xin’s forehead, and without a word, he knelt down before Qi Rong and *ko, ko, ko,* kowtowed three times, before Xie Lian could stop him. Quite pleased, Qi Rong laughed out loud.

“All right, I guess I’ll forgive you. Why couldn’t you have done this earlier?”

Even though Qi Rong’s arm was also broken, he looked energized and refreshed when he left, as if he had just won a battle. As for Feng Xin, he was still kneeling on the ground. Mu Qing stood on the sidelines watching, looking vaguely ashen, but his thoughts were otherwise unreadable.

Xie Lian whipped around to face his father, yelling angrily, “YOU—!”

Feng Xin grabbed him with his left arm. “Your Highness!”

The queen also put her hands on him to pull him back. Feng Xin had followed Xie Lian since the age of fourteen, and Xie Lian knew he was given preferential treatment by the queen. Feng Xin had only done this because he couldn’t bear to see the queen sad over the dispute between father and son. If Xie Lian threw a fit now, then Feng Xin’s efforts would go to waste. He swallowed his outrage, but the fire continued to burn inside his heart. The king finally looked appeased and left with a grim expression.

The queen had always liked Feng Xin. She sighed. “My child, we’ve wronged you.”

“Please don’t say that, Your Majesty. This was my duty,” Feng Xin replied.

Hearing this, Mu Qing's eyes flickered, and he seemed to sneer soundlessly. Xie Lian, however, closed his eyes.

"Mother, if you really can't handle Qi Rong, lock him up."

The queen sighed, nodded, then shook her head and left as well.

Xie Lian asked for one of the imperial doctors to tend to Feng Xin's right arm, and he apologized.

"Feng Xin, I'm sorry."

Once the others had gone, Feng Xin immediately changed face and clicked his tongue. "This is nothing. I dared to hit him, so why would I be scared of his revenge?" After a pause, he advised, "Your Highness, of course it's right for you to discipline Qi Rong, but don't be angry with His Majesty. His Majesty is the king, and a figurehead of the older generation, so he thinks differently than we do. Seeing the two of you fight makes the queen unhappy. She has her troubles too."

And how could Xie Lian not know his mother had her own troubles?

Qi Rong's mother was the younger blood sister of the queen, and they shared deep sisterly affections. When this sister was young and immature, at the first bloom of romance, she thirsted for freedom and broke off a good engagement to elope with a bodyguard from her palace, lured by his sweet, honeyed words. Who knew that the one she had chosen was a villain? This daughter of nobility was stuffed into a shack barely better than a doghouse, and not half a year later, the villain revealed his true nature and his taste for debauchery. Once Qi Rong was born, he became even more abusive, beating and kicking his wife and child. Finally, the mother couldn't endure it any longer, and when Qi Rong turned five, she dejectedly took him and ran away from home. Because she had long since been disgraced through that royal scandal, she closed the door and no longer stepped foot outside, spending the rest of her life in grim depression, only showing particular love and devotion to her only son.

During an upheaval, Qi Rong's mother lost her life saving the queen. Before she passed, she asked Xie Lian's mother to look after Qi Rong.

Of course, the queen did her utmost. However, it was still awkward raising someone else's son. Discipline was difficult—too strict and it would appear to be abuse, and considering familial affections, she could hardly be so harsh. But too lax, and it would lead to the kind of behavior seen today, and without restraints it would only worsen in the future. The queen often wondered—she raised Xie Lian and Qi Rong almost the same, so why were their characters so different?

Just then, Xie Lian suddenly remembered there was a small child still lying on the bed here in the medical office. He raised the bedside curtain to check, and that child had been sitting up since who knows when, looking like he'd been trying to peer out of a crack in the curtains. When Xie Lian raised the curtain, he lay down again obediently.

Xie Lian said, "Did we scare you with that quarrel just now? Don't let it bother you; it has nothing to do with you."

"Your Highness, this child's wounds have been tended to. Now he needs quiet rest," one of the imperial doctors said.

Xie Lian dipped his head slightly. "Thank you."

He then bent down again to ask, "Where do you live? I'll take you home."

That child shook his head. "No home."

Feng Xin approached, holding the arm that was now in a sling. "No home? So, he really is a little beggar?"

Seeing that this child was so emaciated and small, his clothes filthy and unkempt, it wasn't impossible to believe. If he had no home to return to, they couldn't possibly leave him at the palace or throw him out on the streets.

Xie Lian pondered for a moment, then said, "If that's the case, then let's bring him with us back to Mount Taicang."

Unexpectedly, Mu Qing suddenly spoke up. "He's lying."

Chapter 27:
To Ascend Is Human, to Fall Is Also Human

XIE LIAN TURNED HIS HEAD and asked, “What do you mean?”

“The homeless street urchins of the imperial capital all run together in a gang, and they come to my neighborhood frequently to beg for food. I know all of them, but I’ve never seen this child before.”

That young child peered at Mu Qing and didn’t say a word. Feng Xin was doubtful.

“Who do they beg for food from? You? And you’d give it to them?”

Mu Qing glared at him. “If they pester relentlessly, there’s no other way.”

Feng Xin still thought the notion rather unbelievable but didn’t make any further commentary. “Oh.”

Watching their exchange, Xie Lian wanted to laugh.

“Besides, there are sewn patches on his clothes,” Mu Qing added. “Judging by the needlework, it must have been done by a grown-up sometime recently, so there’s at least someone of age in his household. His family situation might not be the best, but he’s definitely not a beggar.”

Xie Lian naturally would not notice the details of needlework on sewn patches, nor whether it was done by adults. But Mu Qing used to be an errand boy at the Royal Holy Temple, and he also did all kinds of chores at home.

When Xie Lian looked closely, it was indeed as he had said. So he asked, “Do you have grown-ups at home?”

The young child shook his head, but Mu Qing said, “There must be. If he doesn’t go back, his family will surely be worried sick looking for him.”

“No, no way! There’s nobody!” that young child cried, sounding like he was afraid to be sent back, and he opened his arms reaching for Xie Lian.

He was still covered with mud and blood, and Feng Xin couldn't stand it anymore. "What're ya doin', kid? Things were urgent earlier, so whatever, but shouldn't you know better by now? This is the crown prince. His Highness the *Crown Prince*. Do you understand?"

That young child's arms immediately shrank back, but he was still gazing at Xie Lian. "My parents were quarreling and kicked me out. I walked for a long time but had nowhere to go."

The other three looked at each other in dismay. After a moment, Feng Xin said, "So what now?"

One of the imperial doctors suggested, "If His Highness is troubled, he can be kept here in the palace and have a few attendants assigned to take care of him."

Xie Lian contemplated, but after some thought, he shook his head slowly. At the end of the day, he was afraid Qi Rong wouldn't give up, and he'd sneak out to cause trouble.

"The way I see it, it'd still be best if I watch over him until his wounds are healed. It seems his family won't be able to look after him, unfortunately. Feng Xin, when you take care of the stalls that were toppled by Qi Rong, send some men to see if his parents can be found and let them know so they don't worry."

"All right." Feng Xin nodded.

One of his arms was still in a sling, but he extended the good arm to reach for the young child, intending to pick him up by the collar. Xie Lian laughed.

"You're wounded. Don't worry about it."

However, Feng Xin shrugged it off. "Only one arm is broken, the other's still fine. If both my arms were broken, I could still use my teeth to carry him by the collar and bring him up the mountain for you."

Mu Qing rolled his eyes from behind him, then spoke up. "Don't bother. Let me carry him."

But just as he took one step forward, the child jumped off the bed himself and said, "I can walk on my own."

That expression, set with resistance, spoke louder than words, and it made Mu Qing's second step extremely awkward, as he was unsure whether or not to proceed. That little kid had five broken ribs and a broken leg, but he was still bursting with energy. Xie Lian really didn't know whether to laugh or ache for him.

He settled on saying, "Stop running around!" Then he bent down and picked him up.

The three of them left the palace with the child in tow. Since Qi Rong had caused havoc on the streets earlier, disturbing the townspeople and toppling a number of stalls, Xie Lian felt deeply guilty and that he had no face to meet any of the citizens. So the group slunk around, afraid to show themselves, using only the back alleyways. The entire way, that small child was extremely docile in Xie Lian's arms. They told him to be quiet, and he uttered not a single sound.

Feng Xin glared. "This brat kicked me yesterday, but look at him now. He really knows how to pick 'em."

"It's His Highness the Crown Prince. Of course he's liked more than most people," Mu Qing said.

For some reason, even when he said something well meaning, he'd still choose words that made people feel wholly uncomfortable. Feng Xin didn't want to acknowledge him anymore.

After walking for a while, Feng Xin spoke up. "No. I still don't think Your Highness should hold a strange child for everyone to see."

"What's the problem?" Xie Lian asked.

"You're the crown prince!" Feng Xin exclaimed. While he spoke, he saw a worn-down handcart farther up the alley and said, "Put the kid in that cart and pull it."

Mu Qing immediately voiced, "Just so we're clear, I will not pull that thing up the mountain."

"No one's asking you to," Feng Xin said. He reached out and yanked the child from Xie Lian's arms, and the child started struggling again.

"Never mind, forget it. Maybe someone else needs that cart!" Xie Lian said.

Just then, from somewhere nearby, someone suddenly called out. “Are you…the crown prince?”

Another immediately shouted, “Yes, yes, yes! That’s the crown prince! His mask fell yesterday, and I saw his face with my own eyes! That’s him!!”

“Catch him!!”

The three of them froze, their hearts stopped. Although Xie Lian didn’t think he did anything wrong at the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession the day before, he also knew that others might not agree. To cut short the God-Pleasing Martial ceremony was an ominous sign of misfortune; it was taboo amongst the nobility, and when all the excitement wore off after the fact and the people started to wonder what it all meant, they probably wouldn’t be as forgiving either. Added on top of that was the havoc on the streets caused by Qi Rong earlier in the day. The complaints must be endless. If they were surrounded now, it might end badly.

Before Xie Lian could dwell on it, Mu Qing grabbed him and shouted, “Your Highness, run!”

Feng Xin was pulling the cart and urged him too. “Your Highness, I have a broken arm, I won’t be able to stop anyone rioting. Go!”

However, outside the alleyway there was already a mass of people who were pouring in, their faces filled with excitement, blocking all viable exits. The four of them had nowhere to run, and they watched as they were surrounded by countless pairs of wide eyes.

Xie Lian braced himself and thought, *If anything, I’ll just let them beat us down without fighting back.*

But unexpectedly, although the crowd poured in, it didn’t pulverize them. Instead, a number of hands reached out and threw him into the air with cheers of, “YOUR HIGHNESS!” Xie Lian was thrown into the air multiple times but still maintained his calm and composure.

The people shouted, all talking at once.

“Your Highness, that leap on the Grand Avenue of Divine Might yesterday was spectacular!”

Someone praised in awe, “That was such an amazing jump! Really, really, I totally thought the Heavenly Emperor himself had descended! I had goosebumps!”

Another validated him. “His Highness was right to save that child! A life is a life—do they think kids from our poor families are so different? If it were me, I’d do the same!”

Another raged, “That’s right! Today there was talk of how His Highness had ruined the event, and I just couldn’t stand it! If it had been a royal or a noble who had fallen, they wouldn’t be saying those things! Your Highness, don’t mind those people!”

“His Highness is the one who truly cares about us…”

Xie Lian went from feeling guilty at the beginning, to disoriented halfway through, until finally he was affected by the enthusiastic, cheerful faces all around. The crowd clustered around Xie Lian, and when they emerged onto the main street, more and more joined them. Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and that young child were pushed away and separated, left a long way back without any way to get through, and they could only follow along behind the parade. This large assembly of people was surprisingly no smaller than the crowd from the day before. Every time Xie Lian made a move to leave, he was forcibly dragged back in and thrown in the air without any chance of being let down.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but find it both funny and reassuring, and he thought to himself, *The people and the State Preceptor have completely opposite sentiments. It looks like I was in the right.*

***

When they reached Mount Taicang, the setting sun was ablaze, burning strong as always.

Once they passed through the large entrance gates, they saw trainees and cultivators all along the long winding stone path, carrying water buckets and firewood and running up and down the road. They greeted Xie Lian and company as they went, but many watched the four-plus-a-cart with wonder. Feng Xin was pulling that handcart with one hand like a perfectly diligent young black bull. Xie Lian and Mu Qing laughed with as much restraint as they could muster at first, but since they couldn't change his mind, they stopped caring.

The maple grove was vast, and the wheels turned steadily. As they hiked, Xie Lian helped push the handcart from behind. He was in a good mood and casually asked the child another question.

"Little guy, what's your name, really? Hong what?"

The child gazed at him attentively and answered in a small voice, "I…I don't have a name."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "Your mother didn't give you a name?"

That young child shook his head. "My mother is gone."

Sympathy sprouted in Xie Lian. "Then what did your mother used to call you?"

The child hesitated for a moment, and then he replied, "Honghong-er."[16]

Xie Lian smiled. "That's a rather cute nickname. I'll call you that from now on."

Honghong-er seemed shy whenever they talked, and he kept his head bowed low. Dusk was approaching, and lights were ignited in the palace temples on each of the mountain peaks in the far distance. Among them, the brightest was of course the highest peak, the Divine Might Summit.

Atop the Divine Might Summit, within the Palace of Divine Might, it was as bright as day, and the lights gathered like stars on the peak. Xie Lian sighed as he watched.

The sigh wasn't born of sadness but from scenery that emanated such beauty and magnificence. Every bit of light within the hall was an offered Everlasting Lamp. Each lamp contained a devotee's most sincere prayers. The more Everlasting Lamps there were within the temple of a god, the more powerful that god. The chance to offer a lamp within the Palace of Divine Might of the Royal Holy Temple was difficult to buy even with a thousand gold. Wealth, power, ability, passion, affinity—at least one of those five conditions must be fulfilled to enter the temple to offer light. Yet there were so many in the world who had none of those five.

The four of them stopped, gazing spellbound upon the Palace of Divine Might that shone like the sun, their expressions dissimilar. Just then, a somewhat familiar voice called out to them.

“Your Highness!”

Xie Lian looked back and saw a fair-faced young man hurrying toward him. It looked like the trainee who guarded the entrance of Sixiang Palace, and Xie Lian composed himself.

“Zhu-shixiong, what’s the hurry?”

Zhu-shixiong noticed Mu Qing standing behind him and felt awkward, so he spoke pretending not to have seen him. “State Preceptor has been asking after you for a while. He’s at the Palace of Divine Might right now, waiting for you.”

Xie Lian was taken aback hearing this, but he figured it had to be about the incident during the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession the day before. “Very well. Thank you, shixiong.”

Xie Lian had Feng Xin and Mu Qing take Honghong-er back to the Palace of Xianle, then he headed toward the Divine Might Summit.

Outside the great hall, clouds born from the incense vessel floated and wrapped around the Palace of Divine Might, giving it a dreamlike look. On either side of the vessel there were long rows of bright Everlasting Lamps hung in the air in neat lines that made a wall of lanterns. Every Everlasting Lamp had the name and prayer of the light-offerer inscribed in proper and dignified clerical script. Once inside the hall, there were rows upon rows of even more Everlasting Lamps hung on each wall. The lamps offered within the Palace of Divine Might were, of course, even more valuable than the ones outside.

Inside the massive temple, at the very front, the Chief State Preceptor was offering incense before the statue of the Heavenly Emperor, and the three Deputy State Preceptors were behind him, uniformly prostrating before the divine statue.

Xie Lian nodded when he entered. “State Preceptor.”

The State Preceptors finished paying their respects before they turned to him and motioned for him to come forward. Thus, Xie Lian approached, took an incense stick, and also paid his respects with sincerity.

It was a moment before the State Preceptor finally spoke.

“Your Highness, the four of us have deliberated. In regards to the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, there are but two ways to resolve the problem.”

“Please, do tell, State Preceptor,” Xie Lian said.

“The first method,” the State Preceptor said, “is to find the child who disrupted the procession, and then we shall conduct a ceremony. At the very least, one of his five senses must be sealed as penance.”

Xie Lian’s head shot up.

“No.” He then repeated definitively, “Absolutely not.”

The State Preceptor nodded. “I expected this response from you. So we’ve put the weight of our consideration on the second method.”

“Please, do tell,” Xie Lian said solemnly.

“The second method,” the State Preceptor said, “is to have Your Highness publicly repent before the people of Xianle, ask the heavens for forgiveness, then face the wall in reflection for a month.”

“Not possible,” Xie Lian said leisurely.

The State Preceptor was taken aback. “We’re not really asking you to face the wall to reflect, you just have to look like you are…ahem.” He suddenly remembered they were before the statue of the Heavenly Emperor and immediately corrected himself. “As long as you are sincere, it will suffice.”

Still, Xie Lian responded, “No.”

“And the reason?” the State Preceptor asked.

“State Preceptor, when I descended the mountain today, do you know what I saw?” Xie Lian asked. “Not only did the people of the imperial capital not condemn the accident that happened during the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, they very much approved of it. This proves that the people of this kingdom all believe that the decision to save that child was right. If I were to do as you say and be punished for something correct, what would they think? Won't it only tell everyone that if we save a life, not only do we not obtain fortuitous merits, but we'll instead be punished for our sin? How should they think or act after that?"

"Whether it's right or wrong isn't important," the State Preceptor said. "You must choose between the two paths. Nothing is perfect in this world. Either that child shoulders this blame, or you do."

"Right or wrong is very important. If I must choose, then I choose the third path," Xie Lian replied.

The State Preceptor rubbed his forehead. "Your Highness…excuse my bluntness, but why do you care what they think? Today they think one way, tomorrow they'll think another. There's no need for you to mind the small details; trust me, people will carry on doing what they need to do and will not be touched by your actions nor use you as an example. It's best if we focus on carefully serving the ones above."

Xie Lian was silent for a moment, then spoke. "State Preceptor, ever since I entered the Royal Holy Temple to become a disciple here, the more I train, the more I reflect. There's actually something I've always thought but didn't dare to speak of."

"And what's that?" the State Preceptor asked.

"Is it really right for us to worship and prostrate before the gods like this?"

The State Preceptor was speechless for a moment. "If we don't worship the gods, then what are we to do? Go homeless? What, Your Highness thinks that the thousands and millions of devotees who come here to worship are wrong in their beliefs?"

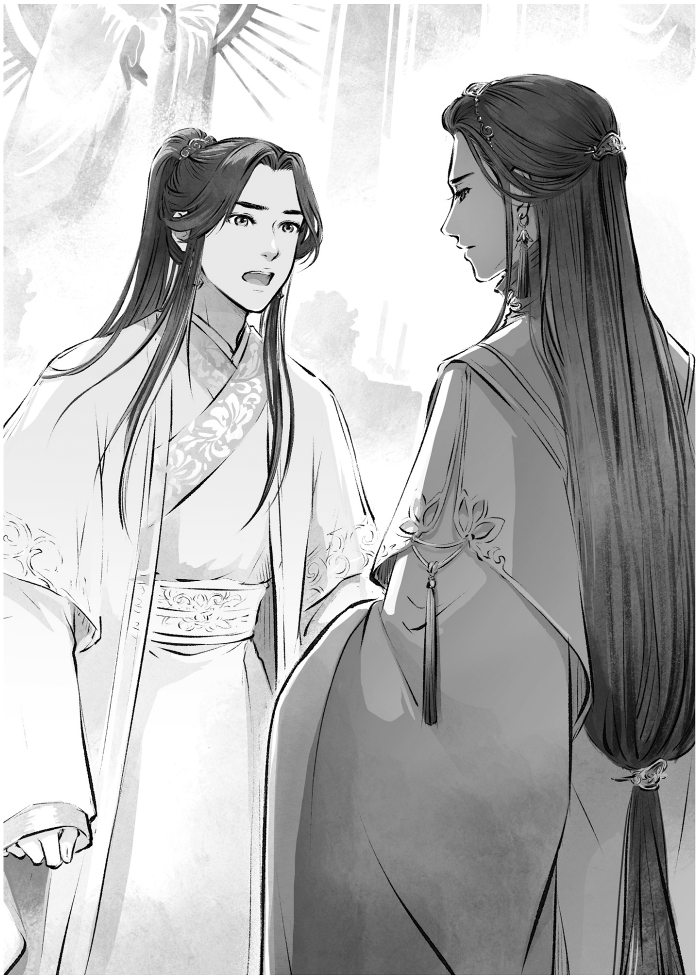
Xie Lian shook his head and pondered for a moment. Then he said, "Their beliefs are not wrong. It's only that…this disciple doesn't think it's right to prostrate oneself."

He raised his head and pointed to the resplendent, scintillating great statue of the Heavenly Emperor.

"When humans ascend, they become gods. To humans, gods are elders, teachers, everlasting light, but they are not our masters. Therefore, we should be full of thankfulness and admiration but never groveling worship. Just like the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, I believe the correct attitude is thankfulness and shared joy—not fear, not ingratiation, not intimidation, and certainly not putting oneself in a position of servitude."

The State Preceptor remained poised and silent, but the other three Deputy State Preceptors grew restless, turning their heads back.

Xie Lian continued, "An accident happened. It couldn't be helped. I am willing to offer a thousand lamps to brighten long nights; even if this is an act of self-destruction, I am not afraid. But I refuse to bow my head for something I did right. Face the wall in reflection? What have I done wrong? What has anyone done wrong? It's like how Qi Rong committed evil, but Feng Xin—who subdued the wrongdoer—had to be punished. Where's the logic in it? If the heavens have eyes, they will not condemn me for this."



The State Preceptor cast his gaze elsewhere. “Then, Your Highness, let me ask you. What if the heavens really do condemn you? Will you apologize then?”

“If that should happen, then the heavens are wrong. I am right. I will stand against the heavens and defy them until the end.”

Hearing this, the State Preceptor’s face changed slightly, and he chuckled. “Your Highness, you’re pretty brave to say such words.”

The other three Deputy State Preceptors watched him, wanting to speak, but hesitated. Just then, an alarm suddenly blared outside the hall, like the ringing of multiple bells at once. Now none of the four State Preceptors could remain in their seats any longer, and they rushed out at the same time, dashing toward the back of the hall.

Xie Lian followed close behind. They traveled through the many buildings behind the Palace of Divine Might until they came before a black pagoda. The doors to that black pagoda were open, and countless wisps of dark smoke whooshed out.

The State Preceptor let out a despairing scream. “Where’s Zhu An?! Where the hell did he go?! How did this happen?!”

A number of trainee watchguards rushed over, and the one leading was Zhu-shixiong. “State Preceptor!! I’m over here! I don’t know what happened—the door was perfectly locked, but it suddenly opened on its own!”

The State Preceptor pulled at his hair. “Quickly! Bring me a new soul-sealing jar!”

Xie Lian charged straight inside. Within that black pagoda, the walls were covered in latticed sandalwood panels of varying sizes and shapes, stacked unevenly atop each other. Within each panel were various clay jars, porcelain vases, jaded boxes, and so on. Each of those containers had originally been secure, the red stoppers stuffed firmly in place, the mouths sealed with yellow talismans inscribed with vermilion spells. But now, many were shattered. Many more continued to drop off the shelves by themselves, and those not yet fallen were wobbling.

Each of those soul-sealing containers had a demon or ghost who once caused havoc sealed within. A black pagoda like this existed in the back of every single temple on Mount Taicang, utilizing the mountain’s pure, saintly qi to keep them subdued. However, something had happened to cause this sudden insurgence, and they had all escaped!

“It’s too late!” Xie Lian shouted.

He immediately kicked the doors closed. The steel lock that originally chained up the door had been broken by the resentful spirits, so Xie Lian unsheathed his sword and used the tip to draw out some characters, then plunged it down. He’d brought over two hundred swords with him when he arrived at the mountain, and he’d switch the one he carried on his person almost every day; each was a peerless, singular, treasured sword. This sword, having been planted in the ground at a slant, did indeed seal the door shut, never to be opened again. Only the sounds of resentful spirits thrashing in rage within the black pagoda could be heard.

Once they retreated from the black pagoda, they looked up, and atop each of the summits, black clouds were erupting from the black pagodas behind each temple. All the resentful spirits were rushing to the sky, and like rolling thick smoke, they all flew toward the same place to gather.

“What’s over there? Why are they all flying over there?” Zhu An asked.

The State Preceptor yelled, “Have you lost your brains?! That’s the Palace of Xianle!”

The group moved like there was wind beneath their feet, and in the blink of an eye, they arrived at the Xianle Summit. On top of Mount Taicang, heavy, thick smoke emerged from countless temples across innumerable peaks and rolled over to form an enormous whirlpool above the Palace of Xianle.

“What’s going on in that Palace of yours?! The evils are all being lured over—what exactly did you put inside?!” the State Preceptor demanded.

Xie Lian was dumbfounded too. “Nothing! Just…”

Just what? Xie Lian suddenly remembered: that child!

At that same moment, Zhu-shixiong cried, “State Preceptor, this is bad! The Crown Prince Hall is on fire!”

Sure enough, a corner of the Xianle Palace was alight, flames bursting toward the sky, reflecting a faint shade of crimson on the black clouds above. At the foot of Mount Taicang, all those in the imperial capital who hadn’t yet gone to bed witnessed the scene from afar, but they had no idea what was going on. They excitedly dragged others outside to watch in awe.

“Wow! The great gods on the immortal mountain are performing magic! What a show!”

In a flash, the group arrived at the Palace of Xianle. Xie Lian didn’t keep too many servants, and dozens of cultivators from the other summits had hurried over, desperately drawing well water and trying to put out the fires. Xie Lian didn’t see his two attendants, and he rushed straight inside. All the resentful spirits of Mount Taicang had gathered here; the Palace of Xianle was practically pitch-black inside and nothing could be seen.

Xie Lian vaguely saw two figures in the center of the great hall and yelled, “Feng Xin! Mu Qing!”

The two were defending a protection array that repelled the invasion of evil spirits, straining as they barely held on. Sure enough, Feng Xin’s voice rang out.

“Your Highness, don’t come in! There’s something strange with this child! All those things are coming for him!”

Only then did Xie Lian notice that behind the two figures was a small, black shadow, kneeling on the floor with his head in his hands.

He cried, “It’s not me!!”

After observing them for a moment, Xie Lian shouted, “Stop holding on. Release the shield!”

Mu Qing cried back, “We can’t release it! If we do, those things will go crazy! Let me find the most—”

Xie Lian cut him off. “No fear. Release it. NOW!”

Mu Qing gritted his teeth, and he and Feng Xin dropped their hands at the same time. Sure enough, with the restraints off, the resentful spirits screeched, ready to go wild! However, in the next second, Xie Lian reached out lightning fast and choked a particular wisp of black smoke.

He didn’t even look, just strangled that black smoke with his bare hands, gripping it firmly in his palm. The moment he caught that one resentful spirit, all the others in the crazed swarm within the Palace of Xianle grew sluggish.

Outside the Palace of Xianle, everyone silently nodded.

In a situation where a large swarm of resentful spirits gathered in the same place, they usually followed the lead of the strongest one. Once that one was caught, the spirits would lose direction without their leader. At that moment, Xie Lian had instantly recognized the strongest one and choked it, leaving it no chance. With only a squeeze, that one resentful spirit disintegrated into nothing in his palm.

Immediately after, the four State Preceptors raised their sleeves and called out, “Come back!”

That swarm of resentful spirits, having lost its leader, flew haphazardly around the Xianle Palace like a band of headless flies until finally they had no choice but to resign themselves to their fate and reluctantly returned to the seals within the State Preceptors’ qiankun sleeves. Dozens of other cultivators continued to put out the remaining fires, and only when the heavy smoke had finally dispersed did Xie Lian clearly see the figures of the other three.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were half-kneeled on the floor, still in shock. Behind them, the child was still holding his head, not uttering a word.

The State Preceptors entered and spoke after only a glance.

“Where did that child come from? Feng Xin said all the resentful spirits were going after him? What’s going on?”

“That’s the child who fell from the city wall during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession.”

All four State Preceptors were taken aback.

The Chief State Preceptor demanded, “Why did you bring him here?”

Xie Lian shook his head, not wanting to explain, and instead asked Feng Xin, “What did he do to attract all the resentful spirits of the black pagodas?”

One of Feng Xin’s arms was still in a sling, and he rose to his feet. “I don’t know what he did! But not long after he arrived on the mountain, as soon as he came inside the Palace of Xianle, a bunch of those black things suddenly flew over from the other peaks. They were all barreling this way, swarming around him, gathering more by the minute. We couldn’t get out.”

Xie Lian looked around at the walls and pillars inside the Palace of Xianle, all burned to a crisp. “What about the fire?”

Mu Qing, whose face was covered in soot, said, “We couldn’t leave, so we had to draw an array to defend. Those resentful spirits used the candle flames as kindling and burned the curtains, hoping to force us out of the array.”

“Thank goodness Your Highness came swiftly and immediately seized their vitals! If it kept burning, we’d have been burned to death along with the array!”

Hearing his words, Mu Qing closed his eyes and hung his head. To the side, the four State Preceptors had already surrounded the child, scrutinizing him closely.

“State Preceptor, is there anything the matter with that child?”

If there was anything wrong, like if he were possessed by evil, Xie Lian should’ve been able to recognize it at a glance. In the years he’d studied at the Royal Holy Temple, he had specially trained his sight, and very few things could deceive his eyes. Yet he couldn’t see anything off with this child. The State Preceptor shook his head, also seeming to observe nothing amiss.

He asked the child, “What’s your birth date, month, year, and time?”

Honghong-er seemed guarded against everyone and tense with hostility, and he only stared at him without speaking.

Xie Lian encouraged gently, “Just tell him. The State Preceptor only wants to tell your fortune for your own good.”

The moment he spoke, Honghong-er obediently told them the time of his birth in a small voice. The State Preceptor knitted his brows and started divining with pinched fingers. The people nearby watched him for a bit, then discussed in hushed voices for a bit, and at the sight of his gradually dimming expression, Xie Lian also grew more and more solemn.

While the State Preceptor looked like no more than a tender thirty-something young man, Xie Lian knew better than most just how powerful his shifu was, as the one ruling over the Royal Holy Temple. The Chief State Preceptor of Xianle, Mei Nianqing, was famed throughout the land for his divination. Xie Lian learned the art of the sword and of spells from the Deputy State Preceptors, but he never learned the art of divination from the Chief State Preceptor himself. It was because the State Preceptor told him it was an art of the streets, and as the noble crown prince, he had no need for such tricks. Xie Lian himself also had no particular interest, so he never attempted it. However, whenever the State Preceptor worked his art, there were never any mistakes.

A while later, more and more cold sweat was rolling down the forehead of the State Preceptor as he divined, and he mumbled, “No wonder…no wonder…no wonder he ruined the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession; no wonder the spirits of the black pagodas grew excited upon sensing him; no wonder the Palace of Xianle was burned too… This…this…this is truly…”

“Truly what?” Xie Lian asked.

The State Preceptor wiped his cold sweat and suddenly backed dozens of meters away. “Your Highness, you really brought something you shouldn’t have up the mountain! That child is toxic! He bears a fate of extinction, the sign of the Star of Solitude![17] He is destined to bring destruction to all save for himself—truly the kind that evil loves most! Whoever touches him will have misfortune befall them, and whoever gets close will lose their life!”

Before he even finished, there was a loud scream. Honghong-er leapt to his feet, rushing the State Preceptor to headbutt him.

Although his voice was young and tender, his screams were filled with rage, as if his heart were filled to the brim with inexhaustible pain and despair. The sound made the hearts of many of those present squeeze. That young child was covered in injuries, yet he tore and lashed out like a red-eyed rabid dog, violent and aggressive to the extreme.

The Deputy State Preceptors blocked Honghong-er, and the State Preceptor backed away, yelling, “Make him leave the mountain, hurry! Don’t touch him, I mean it! That fortune is too toxic; don’t touch him!”

The Deputy State Preceptors hurriedly moved aside, and Mu Qing and Feng Xin didn’t know whether to act. Seeing that everyone was avoiding him like he was poisonous vermin, the child was shaken and started thrashing even harder, biting and screaming with all his might.

“I’m not! I’m not!! I’M NOT!!!”

Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped around his waist, encircling his small form. A voice came from above his head.

“You’re not. I know you’re not. Don’t cry, now. I know you’re not.”

The young child pressed his lips closed tightly, grabbing on to the pair of snow-white sleeves around his waist with a desperate grip. He forced himself to hold back for a long time, but in the end, he couldn’t. A stream of tears suddenly rolled down from that round, black eye, and he burst out into sobs.

Xie Lian embraced him from behind and reiterated with conviction, “It’s not you. It’s not your fault.”

Honghong-er whipped around, buried his face in Xie Lian’s chest, and wailed.

This wailing contained no words, utterly meaningless, and was nothing like the sound of crying, but was nevertheless hair-raisingly dreadful. Without looking at the source, it would sound like the desperate cries of a full-grown man breaking down, or the struggling of a small beast on the brink of death with its throat slit open by a knife—as if only by immediate death could it be relieved. Anyone could make such a sound, but it shouldn't be coming from a child of ten years. Everyone was shaken.

A while later, the State Preceptor said, "I mean it. It's best if you let go."

Feng Xin finally came to his senses and exclaimed, "Your Highness! Let go! Be careful of…" But in the end, he didn't have the heart to continue.

"It's fine," Xie Lian said.

Zhu-shixiong, however, was quite concerned for His Highness's welfare and saw that Honghong-er was smearing blood and snot all over Xie Lian's white robes, so he ran over to pull at the young child, berating him, "Hey, kid, stop it!"

Yet the harder he pulled, the harder that young child held on to Xie Lian. He refused to let go no matter what, using both his hands and feet to grip on and screaming in anguish. Several more people came forward to try and tear him away, but that just made him hang on to Xie Lian like a little monkey. Xie Lian found it both funny and pitiful. He held Honghong-er with one hand, gently rubbing up and down that tiny emaciated back to comfort him, while raising the other hand.

"Never mind. Don't worry, let him be."

Some moments later, sensing that the child in his arms had stopped struggling and quieted down, Xie Lian asked the people close by in a low whisper, "Was anyone else hurt in the fire at the Palace of Xianle?"

"No," Mu Qing replied. "We were the only ones inside at the time."

As the Palace of Xianle was burned to a crisp, Xie Lian naturally could no longer stay there. After making sure it was only the building that burned and not any of the people, those who came to help extinguish the fires started to clean up the area, feeling rather distraught from all the charred precious gems and treasures.

Xie Lian wasn't concerned, however. The things he used daily were a little more exquisite than average, but other than that, Xie Lian didn't really have anything valuable inside the Palace of Xianle. The most precious items were his collection of over two hundred treasured swords, but true gold feared no fire, and since those famous swords were all thoroughly tempered and themselves forged in raging flames, they were all unharmed. Once he dug them out himself, Xie Lian stored them temporarily at the Sixiang Palace that belonged to the State Preceptors.

As for Honghong-er, he was still firmly holding on to Xie Lian, and after crying himself to exhaustion, he fell asleep. Xie Lian had wanted to bring him down Mount Taicang to find a safe place to settle him, but the State Preceptor asked him to make a visit to Sixiang Palace first, so Xie Lian carried the child over with him.

Tucking the young child in on the divan and righting the covers, Xie Lian dropped the bedside curtain and backed out of the room with Feng Xin and Mu Qing in tow.

"State Preceptor, is this child's fate really that frightening?"

The State Preceptor pursed his lips. "Why don't you divine it for yourself? Consider all that has happened since he appeared."

The three fell quiet. The moment that young child appeared, he'd fallen off the city wall before the eyes of millions, cutting the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession short after it only made three rounds. When he reappeared, Qi Rong was venting his anger by dragging him through the streets in that horse carriage, disturbing the public, and it all eventually caused Feng Xin to break his arm while Xie Lian butted heads with the king and made the queen's tears roll. This time, all the resentful spirits of Mount Taicang broke out of their seals within the black pagodas and even burned down the Palace of Xianle. Indeed, his misfortune was endless, following him like a shadow.

"Is there any way to resolve this?" Xie Lian asked.

"Resolve it?" the State Preceptor asked. "What do you mean? Change his fate?"

Xie Lian nodded. The State Preceptor said, “Your Highness, you haven’t learned the art of divination from me, so when it comes to these matters, you really don’t understand anything. If you did, you wouldn’t have asked.”

Xie Lian was taken aback and sat up straight. “Please elaborate.”

The State Preceptor took the teapot on the table and poured a cup. “Your Highness, do you still remember that day when you just turned six, when His Majesty and the queen bade me to enter the palace to divine your fortune? Do you recall that one question I asked you?”

Gazing at that steaming cup of tea, Xie Lian thought for a moment. “Do you mean the riddle of the two people and the cup of water?”

That year, the State Preceptor had asked Xie Lian many questions to help tell his fortune. There were questions with answers, and ones without, and with every answer Xie Lian gave, the State Preceptor would have with a variety of praises for the boy, making the king and queen beam with smiles. Many exchanges from that conversation were later passed around as beautiful tales. But there was one question to which, when Xie Lian answered, the State Preceptor gave no commentary. Very few knew of the details, not even Feng Xin, never mind Mu Qing. That question was “Two People and a Cup of Water.”

The State Preceptor spoke, “Two walked the desert, about to die from thirst, and there was only one cup of water. The one who drinks lives, the one who doesn’t dies. If you were a god, who would you give that cup of water to—don’t speak yet, I’ll ask the other two and see how they answer.”

The latter part was directed to the two standing not too far behind. Mu Qing contemplated and responded prudently.

“May I ask who those two people are, what their natures are like, and of their merits? A decision can only be made once all the details are known.”

Feng Xin, on the other hand, answered, “I don’t know! Don’t ask me—tell them to decide amongst themselves!”

Xie Lian snorted and laughed. The State Preceptor admonished, “What are you laughing about? Do you remember how you answered?”

Xie Lian schooled his expression and said solemnly, “Give them another cup.”

Hearing this, between Feng Xin and Mu Qing, one turned his face away and the other lowered his head, as though hiding their reactions. Xie Lian looked back and deadpanned his response.

“Why are you guys laughing? I’m serious. If I were a god, I would definitely give them another cup.”

The State Preceptor gently shook that cup of tea in his hand, and the tea swirled in the cup as if it had a life of its own. He continued, “All fortunes in the world, good or bad, are limited. Just like this cup of water, there’s only so much. Once you’ve drunk your fill, there’ll be no more left for others. If one receives more, another must receive less.

“Throughout the ages, all conflicts are born from the fact that there are many in this world, but only one cup of water, and there is a good reason to justify giving it to any of them. You want to change fate? It’s difficult but not impossible. But if you change that child’s life, someone else’s life will also be changed, and more grudges will be created. Once upon a time, you said to just give another cup of water, just like how today you wanted to choose a third path. Your intention is to expand the source—a beautiful thought. But I must tell you, it’s basically impossible.”

Xie Lian listened silently but disagreed wholeheartedly; still, he didn’t rebut. “Thank you, State Preceptor, for your wisdom.”

The State Preceptor drank the tea, smacked his lips, and said, “Don’t trouble yourself. Wisdom or not, you don’t listen anyway.”

“…” Having been seen through, Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. “State Preceptor, earlier today in the Palace of Divine Might, in a moment of passion, this disciple offended you. Please forgive me for my affront.”

The State Preceptor shook out his sleeves and smiled. “You’re my favorite disciple, as well as the crown prince; how could I not forgive you? Your Highness, I can tell you that you are the most beloved by the heavens I have ever seen.”

Xie Lian didn’t understand, so he listened closely.

The State Preceptor continued, “You have the innate talent, the ambition, the heart, and you’re not afraid of hard work. You have a prestigious background but still have a compassionate nature. No one is more worthy of the title ‘Darling of the Heavens.’ Still, I am worried about you. I’m afraid there will be a trial you won’t be able to pass.”

“And that is?” Xie Lian asked.

“Although you’ve already reached such a height, there are some things that you are still far from understanding and that others can’t teach you. Like that speech you made today at the Palace of Divine Might, that bit about not worshipping gods or something; very few are able to think that far, and that you managed to arrive at such opinions at such a young age is already impressive. However, do not think yourself to be the only one in the world who has had such thoughts.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened slightly.

The State Preceptor continued, “The things you spoke of today have already been said by others, decades or maybe centuries ago, but their words never gained momentum. Their voices were too small, so not many heard. Have you ever wondered why that is?”

Xie Lian pondered briefly and replied, “Because even if they thought of it, they never acted on it, and weren’t determined enough.”

“What about you? What makes you think you’re determined enough?” the State Preceptor asked.

“State Preceptor, do you think I can ascend?” Xie Lian asked.

The State Preceptor gave him a look and said, “If you can’t ascend, then no one can. It’s only a matter of time.”

Xie Lian smiled. “Then just you watch, sir.” He pointed to the sky. “If one day I ascend, I will surely do all that I said today and become a power to behold!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who were standing behind him, both unconsciously held their heads higher after hearing his declaration. Feng Xin’s lips curved upward, and the light shining in Mu Qing’s eyes was exactly the same as Xie Lian’s. The State Preceptor nodded.

"Very well, I shall wait and see. However, I don't think it's a good thing for you to ascend too early. Let me ask you, what is The Path?"

Xie Lian inclined his head. "As you have said, that which is walked is The Path."

"Indeed," the State Preceptor said. "But you haven't walked enough. So, I think it's time for you to take a walk down the mountain."

Xie Lian's face lit up. The State Preceptor continued, "You're seventeen this year. I will permit you to descend Mount Taicang and gain some experience through travels on the outside."

"That's excellent!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

Every day he spent at the imperial capital, just thinking about the king, Qi Rong, and everything else, Xie Lian couldn't help but feel crabby. Plus, now that such a magnificent Palace of Xianle had been torched, he wouldn't be able to avoid another bout with his parents. So why not go farther away and focus wholly on walking his own path?

Just then, the State Preceptor added, "Your Highness, throughout the ages there's a saying that's been passed down like it's self-evident truth. But it's actually wrong, and no one has ever noticed."

"What saying?"

"When humans ascend, they become gods; when humans fall, they become ghosts."

Xie Lian gave it some thought. "Is there something wrong with that?"

The State Preceptor replied, "Of course it's wrong. Remember: when humans ascend, they are still human…when they fall, they are still human."

Xie Lian chewed on those words, and the State Preceptor patted him on the shoulder and glanced behind.

"In any case, as for that child…don't take it to heart. Everyone has their fate. Many times, there won't be a way to help just because you want to. If anything happens, we'll deal with it then. Go out and experience the world. I pray that when you return you will have matured."

However, that very night, outside of everyone's expectations, that child escaped from the Royal Holy Temple and disappeared.

And even further outside of everyone’s expectations, after his travels, at the age of seventeen, Xie Lian the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Xianle soundly defeated a nameless ghost at Yinian Bridge. Just like that, he ascended to the heavens amidst roars of thunder and lightning.

It was the sensation of the Three Realms.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Heaven Official’s Blessing
VOLUME 3

Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Xie Lian

谢怜 "THANK/WILT," "SYMPATHY/LOVE"

Heavenly Title: Xianle, "Heaven's Delight" (仙乐)

Four Famous Tales Title: The Prince Who Pleased God

Once the crown prince of the Kingdom of Xianle and the darling of the Heavens, now a very unlucky twice-fallen god who ekes out a meager living collecting scraps. As his bad luck tends to affect those around him for the worse, Xie Lian has spent his last eight hundred years wandering in solitude. Still, he's accepted his lonely lot in life, or at least seems to have a sense of humor about it. Even for the perpetually unlucky, there's always potential for a chance encounter that can turn eight hundred years of unhappiness around.

Xie Lian has seen and done many things over his very long life and originally ascended as a martial god. While it was his scrap-collecting that saw him ascend for the third time, Xie Lian's feats of physicality are hardly anything to scoff at…though he'd sooner use them as part of a busking performance than to win a fight.

His title Xianle is a multi-layered nickname. "Xianle" is Xie Lian's official heavenly title and also the name of his kingdom. "Xianle" itself can translate to "Heaven's Delight," which ties into Xie Lian's "Four Famous Tales" moniker, "The Prince Who Pleased God." Jun Wu referring to Xie

Lian as “Xianle” sounds professional and businesslike on the surface (as Jun Wu generally refers to gods by their heavenly titles only), but it deliberately and not-so-subtly comes across as an affectionate term of endearment.

Hua Cheng

花城 “FLOWER,” “CITY”

Four Calamities Title: Crimson Rain Sought Flower

A fearsome king of ghosts and terror of the heavens. Dressed in his signature red, he controls vicious swarms of silver butterflies and wields a cursed scimitar known as Eming. His power and wealth are unmatched in the Three Realms, and for this he has as many worshippers as he does enemies (with considerable crossover between categories). He rules over the dazzling and otherworldly Ghost City in the Ghost Realm and is known to drop in at its infamous Gambler’s Den when he’s in a good mood. But it’s hard to imagine anyone would be foolish (or desperate) enough to bet against the house when Hua Cheng is infamous for his supernaturally good luck.

In spite of all this, when it comes to Xie Lian, the Ghost King shows a much kinder and respectful side of himself. He will sleep on a single straw mat in Xie Lian’s humble home or get his hands dirty doing household chores at Puqi Shrine without a moment’s hesitation. From the very start, his secret identity as San Lang seemed to be no secret at all to Xie Lian, but Xie Lian still calls him by this name at Hua Cheng’s request.

Honghong-er

红红儿 “RED,” “RED,” FRIENDLY DIMINUTIVE

A young street urchin who Xie Lian saved from certain death long ago, when Xie Lian was a prince in Xianle. Honghong-er is tiny, emaciated, and hardly looks like the ten-year-old child that he is, nor does he act like it. He is constantly on guard and quick to attack, though he strangely seems to become tame—and quite bashful—when Xie Lian is around. He bears immense shame regarding his supposedly ugly appearance and refuses to remove the bandages he wears to cover half his face.

Honghong-er’s life has clearly been one of immense suffering and hardship, and he clings to every one of Xie Lian’s fleeting acts of kindness toward him as if he has never experienced anything like it before.

The name “Honghong-er” is clearly a nickname—it can be roughly translated to “Little Red.”

HEAVENLY OFFICIALS & HEAVENLY ASSOCIATES

Feng Xin

风信 “WIND,” “TRUST/FAITH”

Heavenly Title: Nan Yang, “Southern Sun” (南陽)

The Martial God of the Southeast. He has a short fuse and foul mouth (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Mu Qing) but is known to be a dutiful, hardworking god. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian’s bodyguard and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

Jun Wu

君吾 “LORD,” “I”

Heavenly Title: Shenwu, “Divine Might” (神武)

The Emperor of Heaven and strongest of the gods. He is composed and serene, and it is through his power and wisdom that the Heavens remain aloft—quite literally. Although the Heavens are full of schemers and gossipmongers, Jun Wu stands apart from such petty squabbles and is willing to listen to even the lowliest creatures to hear their pleas for justice. Despite this reputation for fairness, he does have his biases. In further contrast to the rest of the rabble in Heaven, he shows great patience and affection towards Xie Lian to the point that many grumble about favoritism.

Lang Qianqiu

郎千秋 “YOUTH,” “THOUSAND AUTUMNS”

Heavenly Title: Tai Hua, “Magnificent Peace” (泰华)

The Martial God of the East. He was the crown prince of the Kingdom of Yong’an prior to his ascension. He is naive and prone to black-and-white thinking. Combined with his determination to be the hero, this often results in him barreling headlong into confrontations, regardless of whether his presence is welcome or helpful.

Ling Wen

灵文 “INGENIOUS LITERATUS”

Heavenly Title: Ling Wen

The top civil god and also the most overworked. Unlike the majority of gods, she is addressed by her colleagues and most others by her heavenly title. She is one of the rare female civil gods and worked tirelessly (and thanklessly) for many years to earn her position. Ling Wen is exceedingly competent at all things bureaucratic, and her work keeps Heaven’s business running (mostly) smoothly. She is the creator and head admin of Heaven’s communication array.

Ming Yi

明仪 “ILLUMINATE/UNDERSTAND,” “INSTRUMENT/CEREMONY”

Heavenly Title: Earth Master

The elemental master of earth. Taciturn, sullen, and always looking for a reason to go home—even so, he is often seen out and about with Shi Qingxuan. Shi Qingxuan calls Ming Yi their closest friend and exclusively uses the nickname “Ming-xiong.” Ming Yi claims to not enjoy the Wind Master’s company.

Mu Qing

慕情 “YEARNING,” “AFFECTION”

Heavenly Title: Xuan Zhen, “Enigmatic Truth” (玄真)

The Martial God of the Southwest. He has a short fuse and sharp tongue (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Feng Xin) and is known for being cold, spiteful, and petty. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian’s personal servant and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

Pei Ming

裴茗 SURNAME PEI, “TENDER TEA LEAVES”

Heavenly Title: Ming Guang, “Bright Illumination” (明光)

Four Famous Tales Title: The General Who Snapped His Sword

The Martial God of the North. General Pei is a powerful and popular god, and over the years he has gained a reputation as a womanizer. This reputation is deserved: Pei Ming’s ex-lovers are innumerable and hail from all the Three Realms. Pei Xiu is Pei Ming’s indirect descendant, and Pei Ming has taken him under his wing to help advance his career in the Heavens. And when General Pei sets his sights on a goal, he doesn’t take kindly to those who get in his way.

Pei Xiu

裴宿 SURNAME PEI, “CONSTELLATION”

A martial god and a distant (and indirect) descendant of Pei Ming. He’s usually called “Little Pei” or “General Pei Junior” for this reason, and his own worship is tied to the worship of Pei Ming himself. He is often called in to clean up his ancestor’s messes, but regardless of the circumstances, he always maintains his composure with a polite yet detached air. Always cold and composed, Pei Xiu is a tactician through and through. His ascension to godhood occurred because he led the charge to slaughter the Kingdom of Banyue, and his exile from godhood occurred because of his morally dubious attempts to save his childhood friend Banyue from her fate of eternal punishment.

Quan Yizhen

权一真 “POWER/AUTHORITY,” “ONE,” “TRUTH/GENUINE”

Heavenly Title: Qi Ying, “Stupendous Hero” (奇英)

The (current) Martial God of the West. It is rumored that there was a previous Martial God of the West who was banished from heaven, leading to Quan Yizhen taking the position. Pei Ming aimed to have Pei Xiu replace Quan Yizhen in the position in turn, though these plans were thwarted by Pei Xiu's involvement in the Banyue incident.

Shi Qingxuan

师青玄 "MASTER," "VERDANT GREEN/BLUE," "MYSTERIOUS/BLACK"

Heavenly Title: Wind Master

Four Famous Tales Title: The Young Lord Who Poured Wine

The elemental master of wind and younger sibling of the Water Master, Shi Wudu. Shi Qingxuan ascended as a male god, but over the years, he began to be worshipped as a female version of himself. Shi Qingxuan eagerly embraced this, and she leaps at any opportunity to go out on the town in her female form...and will try to drag anyone she's traveling with into the fun.

Shi Qingxuan is as flighty and pushy as the element they command, and as wealthy as they are generous with their money. They possess a strong sense of justice and will not be dissuaded by notions of propriety. They appear to be close friends with the Earth Master Ming Yi, despite the latter's insistence to the contrary.

GHOST REALM & GHOST REALM ASSOCIATES

Banyue

半月 “HALF-MOON”

Former state preceptor of the Kingdom of Banyue, now a wrath ghost living in a pot in Puqi Shrine.

Lang Ying

郎萤 “YOUTH,” “FIREFLY”

A mysterious ghost child afflicted with Human Face Disease. He has known nothing but abuse for hundreds of years due to his horrifying appearance, save for the fleeting kindness and warmth of the human girl Xiao-Ying. The combination of this trauma and his almost total lack of human interaction has left him mostly mute and constantly on high alert. Xie Lian was the one to give him this name: Lang being the national surname of Yong’an, and Ying to commemorate the girl who once took care of him.

Qi Rong

戚容 “FACE OF SORROW” OR “RELATIVE,” “TOLERANCE/FACE”

Four Calamities Title: Night-Touring Green Lantern

One of the Four Calamities, also called the “Green Ghost.” Unlike the other three Calamities, he’s actually only a wrath ghost, not a supreme. Gods and ghosts alike agree that he was only included in the group to bump up the number to an even four. (Also, he’s just that big a pest.) He is infamous for his crude behavior and ostentatious attempts to copy the style of the more successful Calamities, as well as for his ravenous appetite for human flesh.

Qi Rong is Xie Lian’s younger cousin on his mother’s side, much to Xie Lian’s everlasting dismay. Surprising no one, Qi Rong has been a source of stress and trouble ever since their mortal childhoods in Xianle. His royal title in Xianle was Prince Xiao Jing.

Ship-Sinking Black Water

黑水沉舟

Four Calamities Title: Ship-Sinking Black Water

One of the Four Calamities. Ship-Sinking Black Water is a mysterious and reclusive water ghost that rules the South Sea. Like Hua Cheng, he won the bloody gauntlet at Mount Tonglu and wields the power of a supreme ghost.

Waning Moon Officer

下弦月使

Hua Cheng’s right-hand man, subordinate, and all-around errand runner. He bears a cursed shackle on his wrist, which marks him as a banished heavenly official. He is feared and respected in Ghost City, but what kind of face lurks behind that daunting, mysterious mask?

White No-Face

白无相 “WHITE NO-FACE”

Four Calamities Title: White-Clothed Calamity

One of the Four Calamities. Mysterious, cruel, and powerful enough to battle with the Heavenly Emperor himself—truly, a supreme among supremes. He destroyed the Kingdom of Xianle.

Xuan Ji

宣姬 “DECLARE,” “CONCUBINE”

The wrath ghost known as the ghost bride who—with the help of Qi Rong, the Green Ghost—terrorized and murdered many brides-to-be.

MORTAL REALM & MORTAL REALM ASSOCIATES

State Preceptors of Xianle

A quartet of cultivators who serve as Xianle’s State Preceptors. They are also the religious leaders and head instructors at the Royal Holy Temple, Xianle’s premiere cultivation school and largest place of worship for several gods. They are highly skilled cultivators and specialize in the art of divination, though they are very easily distracted by the allure of a game of cards.

The Chief State Preceptor, Mei Nianqing (梅念卿 “plum blossom,” “to lecture/to long for,” archaic word for minister/high official) is the most talkative of the bunch and has a close relationship with his most cherished student (and biggest headache), Xie Lian. While the names of the three Deputy State Preceptors are unknown, Xie Lian clearly respects their skill and wisdom.

The plum blossom in Mei Nianqing’s name is a symbol of endurance in Chinese flower language, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the junzi (the ideal Confucian gentleman).

Xianle Royal Family

The king and queen of the Kingdom of Xianle, and Xie Lian’s parents. Xie Lian’s father is of the ruling Xie (谢 “to thank/to wilt”) clan, and his mother is of the Min (悯 “to feel pity for/commiserate with”) clan. Xie Lian is very close with his mother, who is a doting—if rather naive and sheltered—parent. Xie Lian has a more contentious relationship with his father and frequently squabbles with him.

When Xie Lian’s given name (怜 / lian) and his mother’s clan name (悯 / min) are written together, they form the word “compassion” (怜悯 / lianmin).

Zhu An

祝安 “WISH”/A SURNAME, “PEACE”

A cultivator trainee in Xianle who enjoys bullying young Mu Qing.

SENTIENT WEAPONS AND SPIRITUAL OBJECTS

Eming

厄命 “TERRIBLE/WRETCHED,” “FATE”

Hua Cheng’s sentient scimitar. With a single blood-red eye that peers out from its silver hilt, it is a cursed blade that drinks the blood of its victims and is the bane of the Heavens. Just like its mysterious master, this scimitar likely has hidden depths of its own…

Fangxin

芳心 “AFFECTIONS OF A YOUNG WOMAN”

An ancient black sword with ties to Xie Lian. Xie Lian used the sword’s name as an alias while serving as the State Preceptor of Yong’an.

Ruoye

若邪 “LIKE/AS IF,” “EVIL” OR “SWORD”

Xie Lian’s sentient strip of white silk. It is an earnest and energetic sort, if a bit nervous sometimes, and will go to great lengths to protect Xie Lian—quite literally, as it can stretch out to almost limitless dimensions.

Locations

Heavenly Realm

The Heavenly Capital is a divine city built upon the clouds. Amidst flowing streams and auspicious clouds, luxurious palaces dot the landscape, serving as the personal residences and offices of the gods. The Grand Avenue of Divine Might serves as the realm's main thoroughfare, and this road leads directly to the Palace of Divine Might—the Heavenly Emperor's residence where court is held.

The Heavenly Court consists of two sub-courts: the Upper Court and the Middle Court. The Upper Court consists entirely of ascended gods, while the Middle Court consists of officials who—while remarkable and skilled in their own right—have not yet ascended to godhood.

Mortal Realm

The realm of living humans. Often receives visitors from the other two realms.

Kingdom of Xianle

仙乐 "HEAVEN'S DELIGHT" OR "HEAVENLY MUSIC"

A fallen kingdom, once glamorous and famed for its riches and its people's love for the finer things in life—such as art, music, gold, and the finest thing of all, their beloved crown prince, Xie Lian. In its glory era, the royal palace is stuffed to the brim with these treasures, save for the last, since Xie Lian rarely returns home, and when he does, it is only for brief visits to his mother's residence at Qifeng Palace.

Xianle's largest cultivation center, the Royal Holy Temple, sprawls across the peaks of the auspicious Mount Taicang. Its qi-rich landscape nurtures the blanketing forests of fruit trees and flame-red maples. The mountain hosts the kingdom's largest Palace of Divine Might for worship of the Heavenly Emperor. The State Preceptors of Xianle preside over the gods' worship as well as cultivator training and reside within the Royal

Holy Temple complex at Sixiang Palace. As a crown prince could hardly mingle so casually with normal disciples, Xie Lian’s parents built him his own residence and training hall—on the second-highest mountain peak—called the Palace of Xianle. Unbeknownst to all save for the Xianle royal family and State Preceptors, the Xianle Imperial Mausoleum is located far beneath Mount Taicang.

Kingdom of Yong’an

永安 “ETERNAL PEACE”

A fallen but once-prosperous kingdom. They rose out of the ashes of the Kingdom of Xianle after its collapse, but soon fell to the very same corruption and excess that doomed Xianle.

Puqi Village

菩荠村 “WATER CHESTNUT”

A tiny village in the countryside, named for the water chestnuts (puqi) that grow in abundance nearby. While small and unsophisticated, its villagers are friendly and welcoming to weary travelers who wish to stay a while. The humble Puqi Shrine (under reconstruction, welcoming donations) can be found here, as well as its resident god, Xie Lian.

Ghost Realm

The Ghost Realm is the home of almost all dead humans, and far less organized and bureaucratic than the Heavenly Realm. Ghosts may leave or be trapped away from the Ghost Realm under some circumstances, which causes major problems for ordinary humans and gods alike.

Ghost City

The largest city in the Ghost Realm, founded and ruled by Hua Cheng. It is a dazzling den of vice, sin, and all things wicked, which makes it the number one spot for visitors from all three realms to shop for nefarious goods and cavort under the glow of the blood-red lanterns.

The city's infamous Gambler's Den beckons the foolish, the greedy, and the desperate, and bids them to bet it all on a roll of the dice for the chance to win riches beyond belief, glory beyond comprehension, and the granting of wishes most unspeakable. But such prizes require more than just gold to be put on the table... Guests are expected to offer up something of equal value to the prize they seek, and such bets quickly grow deadly. The house always wins in the end, after all.

Hua Cheng is rarely present in the city and does not often make public appearances. On the occasion he is in the mood to do so, he is met with considerable adoration; clearly, Ghost City's citizens love their Chengzhu and respect him immensely.

Paradise Manor

Hua Cheng's residence within Ghost City is the secluded Paradise Manor (极乐坊 / Jile Fang), which has never seen guests—until Xie Lian came to call, of course. "Jile" is the Chinese term for the Buddhist realm of paradise, also known as the "Land of Ultimate Bliss." It is a contextual innuendo for sex/orgasm. Thus, visitors to Ghost City cannot be blamed for assuming it is a brothel rather than the residence of the city's owner.

Qi Rong's Lair

Deep within a dark, dismal network of caves lurks the Green Ghost Qi Rong, and from this lair he plots nefarious deeds with his army of little green ghost minions. Deeds plotted include, but are not limited to: launching attacks on Ghost City and failing miserably, ambushing travelers and getting beaten up when they happen to pick targets who can fight back, and abducting helpless peasants from surrounding villages to satisfy Qi Rong's ravenous appetite for human flesh.

Unfortunately, Qi Rong's minions are surprisingly competent at food gathering. The cave network is filled with victims both alive and dead, with "preserves" salted and hung to dry from the cave's ceiling like meat in a butcher's pantry. Luckily, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng crashed his most recent dinner party and set free his captured victims while Qi Rong found himself being made into soup stock.

Other/Unknown

Mount Tonglu

铜炉山 “COPPER KILN MOUNTAIN”

Mount Tonglu is a volcano and the location of the City of Gu. Every few hundred years, tens of thousands of ghosts descend upon the city for a massive battle royale. Only two ghosts have ever survived the slaughter and made it out—one of those two was Hua Cheng.

Name Guide
Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: A word for “son” or “child.” Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone “Little” or “Sonny.”

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning “little.” Always a prefix.

Doubling a syllable of a person’s name can be a nickname, and has childish or cutesy connotations.

Family

DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend. Casual.

GE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Can be used alone or with the person’s name.

GEGE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or an older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “ge.”

JIEJIE: Familiar way to refer to an older sister or an older female friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “jie,” and rarely used by older males.

MEIMEI: Younger sister or an unrelated younger female friend. Casual.

XIONG: Older brother. Generally used as an honorific. Formal, but also used informally between male friends of equal status.

YIFU: Maternal uncle, respectful address.

YIMU: Maternal aunt, respectful address.

Cultivation, Martial Arts, and Immortals

DAOZHANG: A polite address for Daoist cultivators, equivalent to “Mr. Cultivator.” Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s family name—for example, one could refer to Xie Lian as “Daozhang” or “Xie Daozhang.”

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own sect.

YUANJUN: Title for high class female Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

ZHENJUN: Title for average male Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

Other

CHENGZHU: A title for the master/ruler of an independent city-state.

GONGZI: Young master of an affluent household

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! Below is a simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (REN ZHA FAN PAI ZI JIU XI TONG):

ren jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MO DAO ZU SHI):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIAN GUAN CI FU):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHEN QINGQIU: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUO BINGHE: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WEI WUXIAN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LAN WANGJI: Lahn Wong-gee

XIE LIAN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUA CHENG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GONGZI: gong-zzh

DAOZHANG: dow-jon

-JUN: june

DIDI: dee-dee

GEGE: guh-guh

JIEJIE: gee-ay-gee-ay

MEIMEI: may-may

-XIONG: shong

Terms

DANMEI: dann-may

WUXIA: woo-sheeah

XIANXIA: sheeyan-sheeah

QI: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)

Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)

C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)

IU: yoh

UO: wuh

ZHI: jrr

CHI: chrr

SHI: shrr

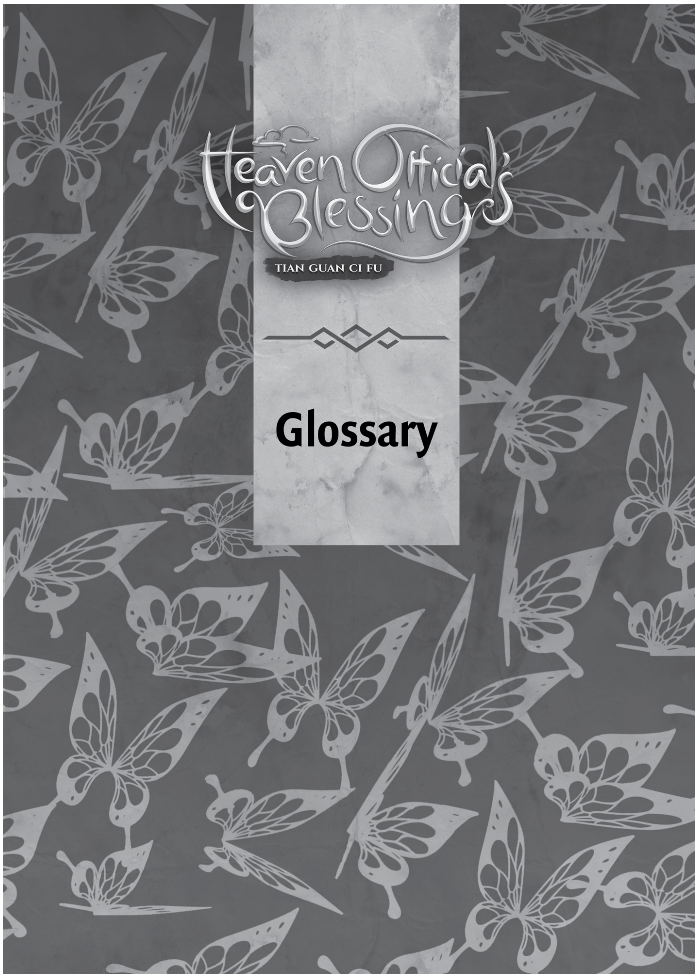
RI: rrr

ZI: zzz

CI: tsz

SI: ssz

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.


Heaven Official's Blessing
TIAN GUAN CI FU

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the governing law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official's Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Heaven Official's Blessing was first serialized on the website *JJWXC*.

TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array’s associated spell(s).

ASCENSION: In typical xianxia tales, gods are conceived naturally and born divine. Immortals cannot attain godhood but can achieve great longevity. In *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, however, both gods and immortals were born mortal and either cultivated deeply or committed great deeds and attained godhood after transcending the Heavenly Tribulation. Their bodies shed the troubles of a mortal form and are removed from the corporeal world.

AUSPICIOUS CLOUDS: A sign of good fortune and the divine, auspicious clouds are also often seen as methods of transport for gods and immortals in myth. The idea springs from the obvious association with clouds and the sky/heavens, and also because yun (云 / “cloud”) and yun (运 / “luck”) sound similar.

BOWING: As is seen in other Asian cultures, standing bows are a traditional greeting and are also used when giving an apology. A deeper bow shows greater respect.

BUDAOWENG: A budaoweng (不倒翁, “wobbly old man”) is an oblong doll, weighted so that it rolls back into an upright position whenever it is knocked down.

CALABASH: Also called a bottle gourd, a calabash is a type of gourd with myriad uses. They can be grown very large, carved out, dried, and used as watertight containers. There are archeological records of these gourds being used in China over ten thousand years ago.

CHINESE CALENDAR: The Chinese calendar uses the *Tian Gan Di Zhi* (Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches) system, rather than numbers, to mark the years. There are ten heavenly stems (original meanings lost) and twelve earthly branches (associated with the zodiac), each represented by a written character. Each stem and branch is associated with either yin or yang, and one of the elemental properties: wood, earth, fire, metal, and water. The stems and branches are combined in cyclical patterns to create a calendar where every unit of time is associated with certain attributes.

This is what a character is asking for when inquiring for the date/time of birth (生辰八字 / “eight characters of birth date/time”). Analyzing the stem/branch characters and their elemental associations was considered essential information in divination, fortune-telling, matchmaking, and even business deals.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Classy, scholarly. Considered masculine, representing the Heavens and the dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth, prosperity. Often reserved for royalty.

BLUE/GREEN: Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality.

CONCUBINES: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (孝 / "filial piety"). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student towards a teacher, or people of a country towards their ruler.

COUGHING/SPITTING BLOOD: A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion.

(See also Seven Apertures/Qiqiao.)

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial arts who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while attaining personal strength and extending their life span.

Cultivation is a long process marked by "stages." There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

◇ Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (凝气/练气)
◇ Foundation Establishment (筑基)
◇ Core Formation/Golden Core (结丹/金丹)
◇ Nascent Soul (元婴)
◇ Deity Transformation (化神)
◇ Great Ascension (大乘)
◇ Heavenly Tribulation (渡劫)

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret or advanced training technique and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CUT-SLEEVE: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor’s love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *dao* (道), known as “the way.” Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a “true human,” safe from external harm and who can affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist superstitions.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil.

DIYU: Diyu (地狱, “earth prison”), is an afterlife in Chinese mythology where evil humans are punished after death, similar to the Western concept of hell. It is based on a combination of Buddhist, Daoist, and traditional Chinese beliefs. Sinners deserving punishment are sent to one of the eighteen levels of Diyu, where they receive the appropriate torture for their crimes.

DRAGON: Great chimeric beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

EIGHT TRIGRAMS MAP: Also known as the bagua or pakua, an eight trigrams map is a Daoist diagram containing eight symbols that represent the fundamentals of reality, including the five elements. They often feature a symbol for yin and yang in the center as a representation of perfect balance between opposing forces. (See also The Five Elements and Yin Energy and Yang Energy)

ENTRANCE COUPLETS: Written poetry verses that are posted outside the door of a building. The two lines of poetry on the sides of the door express the meaning/theme of the establishment, or are a wish for good luck. The horizontal verse on the top summarizes or is the subject of the couplets.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as “face”, is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation, and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / “Five Phases”). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

- Wood (木 / mu)
- Fire (火 / huo)
- Earth (土 / tu)
- Metal (金 / jin)
- Water (水 / shui)

FORTUNE SHAKER: A wooden jar full of thin bamboo sticks with varying degrees of good and bad luck inscribed on the bottom ends. The user shakes the jar with a wish in mind, and the first stick that drops out will dictate the outcome of the wish.

GHOST: Ghosts (鬼) are the restless spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts produce yin energy and crave yang energy.

GU SORCERY: The concept of gu (蛊 / "poison") is common in wuxia and xianxia stories. In more realistic settings, it may refer to crafting poisons that are extracted from venomous insects and creatures. Things like snakes, toads, and bugs are generally associated with the idea of gu, but it can also apply to monsters, demons, and ghosts. The effects of gu poison are bewitchment and manipulation. "Swayed by gu" has become a common phrase meaning "lost your mind/been led astray" in modern Chinese vocabulary.

HAND GESTURES: The baoquan (抱拳 / "hold fist") is a martial arts salute where one places their closed right fist against their open left palm. The gongshou (拱手 / "arch hand") is a more generic salute not specific to martial artists, where one drapes their open left palm over their closed right fist. The orientation of both of these salutes is reversed for women. During funerals, the closed hand in both salutes switches, where men will use their left fist and women their right.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

HEAVENLY REALM: An imperial court of enlightened beings. Some hold administrative roles, while others watch over and protect a specific aspect of the celestial and mortal realm, such as love, marriage, a piece of land, etc. There are also carefree immortals who simply wander the world and help mortals as they go, or become hermits deep in the mountains.

HEAVENLY TRIBULATION: Before a Daoist cultivator can ascend to the heavens, they must go through a trial known as a Heavenly Tribulation. In stories where the Heavens are depicted with a more traditional nine-level structure, even gods themselves must endure and overcome tribulations if they want to level up. The nature of these trials vary, but the most common version involves navigating a powerful lightning storm. To fail means losing one's attained divine stage and cultivation.

HUALIAN: Shortened name for the relationship between Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

IMMORTALS AND IMMORTALITY: Immortals have transcended mortality through cultivation. They possess long lives, are immune to illness and aging, and have various magical powers. An immortal can progress to godhood if they pass a Heavenly Tribulation. The exact life span of immortals differs from story to story, and in some they only live for three or four hundred years.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and usually limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes.

In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, the incense sticks being referenced are the small sticks one offers when praying at a shrine, so "one incense time" is roughly thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade." Other colors of jade will usually be specified in the text.

JADE EMPEROR: In Daoist cosmology, the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) is the emperor of heaven, the chief of the heavenly court, and one of the highest ranked gods in the heavenly realm, lower only to the three primordial emanations. When one says "Oh god/lord" or "My heavens", it is usually referring to the Jade Emperor. In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Jun Wu's role replaces that of the Jade Emperor.

JADE MAIDEN: A jade maiden (玉女) is a goddess who, along with her male counterpart golden boy (金童), are favored servants to the Jade Emperor.

JOSS PAPER: Also referred to as ghost paper, joss paper is a form of paper crafting used to make offerings to the deceased. The paper can be folded into various shapes and is burned as an offering, allowing the deceased person to utilize the gift the paper represents in the realm of the dead. Common gifts include paper money, houses, clothing, toiletries, and dolls to act as the deceased's servants.

KOWTOW: The *kowtow* (叩头 / “knock head”) is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

NIGHT PEARLS: Night pearls, or yemingzhu, are luminescent fluorite crystals. Their fluorescence comes from various rare trace elements in igneous rock that collect into ore veins with the movement of the Earth’s crust. To create them, these rare, glow-in-the-dark stones are carved into smooth spheres and polished. These real-life valuable stones feature prominently in many Chinese myths and legends. According to historical records, they were originally discovered near the prehistoric towns of Yandi and Shennong.

Numbers

TWO: Two (二 / “er”) is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom “good things come in pairs.” It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (三 / “san”) sounds like *sheng* (生 / “living”) and also like *san* (散 / “separation”).

FOUR: Four (四 / “si”) sounds like *si* (死 / “death”). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (七 / “qi”) sounds like *qi* (齊 / “together”), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like *qi* (欺 / “deception”).

EIGHT: Eight (八 / "ba") sounds like *fa* (發 / "prosperity"), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (九 / "jiu") is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX's work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege ("second brother Lan") as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang ("third youth") when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

PHOENIX: *Fenghuang* (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary chimeric bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the Empress, and happy marriages.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT: The essence of one's existence beyond the physical. The body perishes, the soul enters the karmic wheel, but the spirit that makes one unique is eternal.

QI: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with lush wildlife are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QIANKUN SLEEVES: Qiankun pouches (乾坤袋) or Qiankun sleeves (乾坤袖) are containers that are bigger on the inside, used to easily carry cargo a person normally couldn’t manage. Qiankun items are common in wuxia and xianxia literature.

RED STRING OF FATE: Refers to the myth in many East Asian cultures that an invisible red string connects two individuals who are fated to be lovers. The string is tied at each lover’s finger (usually the middle finger or pinky finger).

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: (七窍) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be “bleeding from the seven apertures.”

SHANGYUAN: Shangyuan Jie (上元節), or the Lantern Festival, marks the fifteenth and last day of the Lunar New Year (usually around February on the Solar Calendar). It is a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens by hanging lanterns, solving riddles, and performing Dragon Dances. Glutinous rice ball treats known as yuanxiao and tangyuan are highlights of this festival, so much so that the festival’s alternate name is Yuanxiao Jie (元宵節).

SHRINES: Shrines are sites at which an individual can pray or make offerings to a god, spirit, or ancestor. They contain an object of worship to focus on such as a statue, a painting or mural, a relic, or a memorial tablet in the case of an ancestral shrine. The term also refers to small roadside shrines or personal shrines to deceased family members or loved ones kept on a mantle. Offerings like incense, food, and money can be left at a shrine as a show of respect.

STATE PRECEPTOR: State Preceptors, or guoshi, are high-ranking government officials who also have significant religious duties. They serve as religious heads of state under the emperor and act as the tutors, chaplains, and confidants of the emperor and his direct heirs.

SWORDS: A cultivator’s sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed to them by their master, a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brotherhood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals of the same gender. It can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons, and is not only limited to two participants; it can extend to an entire group. It was most common among men, but it was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other’s families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc.

Sworn siblinghood, where individuals will refer to themselves as brother or sister, is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with spells written on them, often with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

THE THREE REALMS: Traditionally, the universe is divided into Three Realms: the **Heavenly Realm**, the **Mortal Realm**, and the **Ghost Realm**. The Heavenly Realm refers to the Heavens and Celestial Court, where gods reside and rule, the Mortal Realm refers to the human world, and the Ghost Realm refers to the realm of the dead.

“TRUE GOLD FEARS NO FIRE”: An idiom/metaphor for a hero who is able to emerge from adversity uncorrupted.

VINEGAR: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means they’re having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

WHISK: A whisk held by a cultivator is not a baking tool but a Daoist symbol and martial arts weapon. Usually made of horsehair bound to a wooden stick, the whisk is based off a tool used to brush away flies without killing them and is symbolically meant for wandering Daoist monks to brush away thoughts that would lure them back to secular life. Wudang Daoist Monks created a fighting style based on wielding it as a weapon.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

YUAN FESTIVALS: Yuan (元) means “the origins of the universe” in Chinese Foundation philosophy (Iching). The Yuan festivals divided the lunar year into three sections: the Upper (Shang), the Middle (Zhong), and the Lower (Xia). Each festival celebrates the divine forces that invigorate the world. Shangyuan celebrates the heavens, Zhongyuan celebrates the dead, and Xiayuan celebrates the waters.

ZHONGYUAN: Zhongyuan Jie (中元節), or the Ghost Festival / Hungry Ghost Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Lunar Calendar (this usually falls around August/September on the Solar Calendar). The festival celebrates the underworld, and offerings are made to the dead to appease their spirits and help them move on.

Footnotes

1. Written with the character 风.

2. One of the foundational texts of Daoism, written in the 4th century BC.

3. “Chengzhu” is a title for the master/ruler of an independent city-state.

4. Originally a cutesy term for a very young, unrelated male child, this term has come to be used as slang for “penis.”

5. “Bladed mountain, sea of fire” is a reference to Diyu (地狱, “earth prison”), which is an afterlife in Chinese mythology where evil humans are punished after death, similar to the Western concept of hell. The mountain of blades is one of the many punishments that exists within it.

6. A budaoweng (不倒翁, wobbly old man) is an oblong doll with a weight in the bottom so that it rolls back into an upright position whenever it is knocked down.

7. A common trope in Chinese fantasy, “Land of the Tender” generally refers to places where men find solace in feminine charms (such as brothels), or the use of aphrodisiacs or seduction.

8. In familiar address, cousins often refer to each other as siblings.

9. An Le (安樂): [安] means “safe,” “peace,” and “to settle” and is the same character from the Kingdom of Yong’an’s second syllable. [樂] means “happiness,” “joy.” Qi Rong is dissecting the parts of the title and drawing his own meaning from the characters.

10. “Fengshen” translates to “God of Wind.”

11. Night pearls, or yemingzhu, are luminescent fluorite crystals. To create them, rare, glow-in-the-dark fluorite is carved into smooth spheres and polished. These real-life valuable stones feature prominently in many Chinese myths and legends.

12. Maternal aunt, respectful address.

13. Shangyuan Festival is also known as the Lantern Festival, marking the 15th and last day of the Lunar New Year. It’s a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens.

14. A reference to a verse from Lu You’s “Ode to the Plum Blossom”: “Her petals may be ground in the mud, but her fragrance will endure.”

15. “Eyes red with envy” is an idiom that indicates jealousy, similar to the English idiom “eyes green with envy.”

16. “Honghong-er” means “My son, Reddie” or just “Little Red.”

17. [天煞孤星] The Star of Solitude: People with this sign in their fortune are said to bring great misfortune to those around them while they themselves are fine, hence the name. This sign can be nullified with the

intervention of a savior. The Star of Solitude and Sha Po Lang are the two most devastating signs in Chinese divination.

About the Author

“A young superstitious girl,

renowned poster of memes;

a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;

and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.

...All lies.

I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.

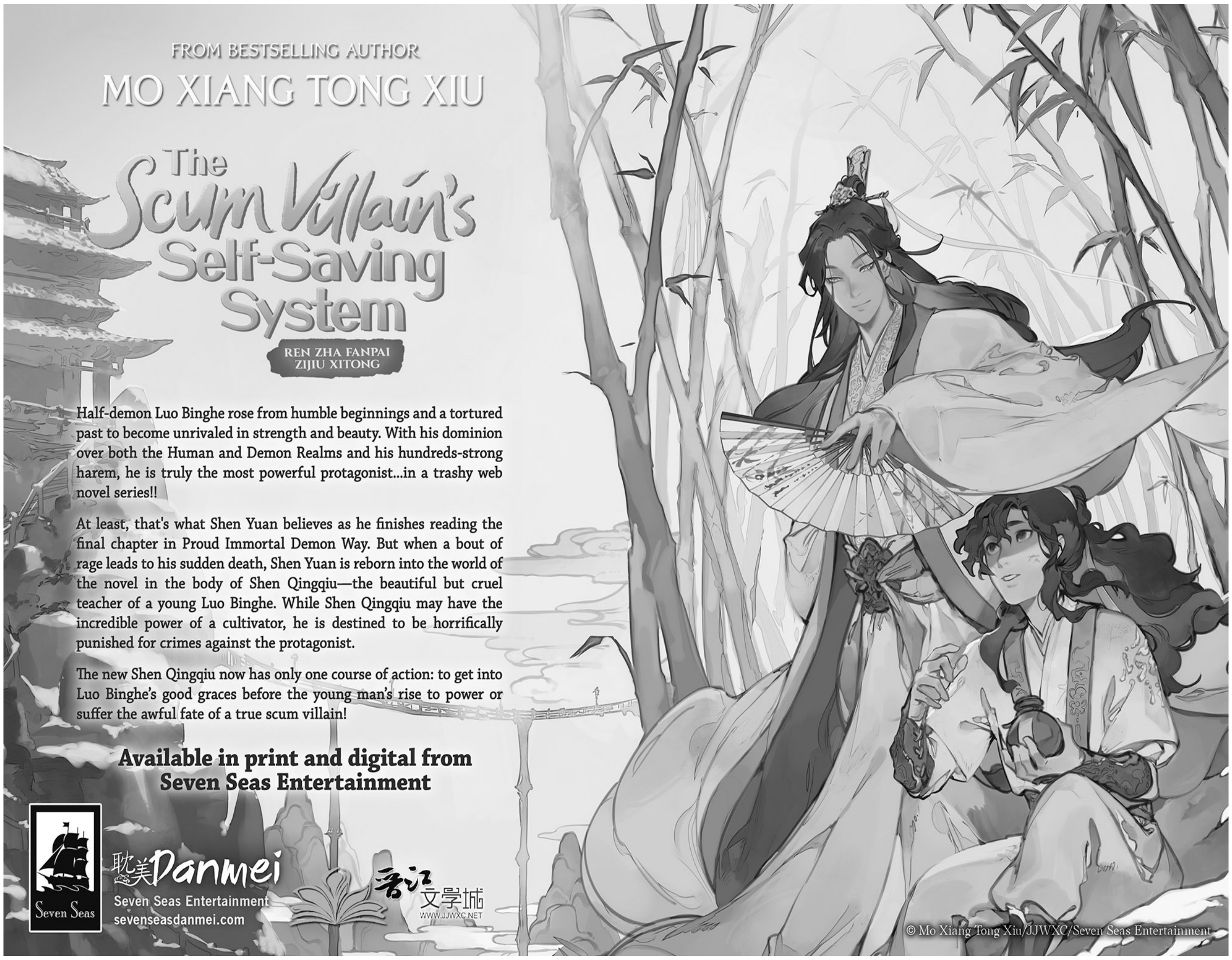
...No, no, no, that’s even more of a lie.

All right, actually, I'm just someone

who writes.

Yep.”

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned author whose works are often cited as the best-known in the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System, Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing.* All three series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.



FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MO XIANG TONG XIU

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System

REN ZHA FANPAI
ZIJIU XITONG

Half-demon Luo Binghe rose from humble beginnings and a tortured past to become unrivaled in strength and beauty. With his dominion over both the Human and Demon Realms and his hundreds-strong harem, he is truly the most powerful protagonist...in a trashy web novel series!!

At least, that's what Shen Yuan believes as he finishes reading the final chapter in Proud Immortal Demon Way. But when a bout of rage leads to his sudden death, Shen Yuan is reborn into the world of the novel in the body of Shen Qingqiu—the beautiful but cruel teacher of a young Luo Binghe. While Shen Qingqiu may have the incredible power of a cultivator, he is destined to be horrifically punished for crimes against the protagonist.

The new Shen Qingqiu now has only one course of action: to get into Luo Binghe's good graces before the young man's rise to power or suffer the awful fate of a true scum villain!

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FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MO XIANG TONG XIU

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

Wei Wuxian was once one of the most outstanding men of his generation, a talented and clever young cultivator who harnessed martial arts, knowledge, and spirituality into powerful abilities. But when the horrors of war led him to seek a new power through demonic cultivation, the world's respect for his skills turned to fear, and his eventual death was celebrated throughout the land.

Years later, he awakens in the body of an aggrieved young man who sacrifices his soul so that Wei Wuxian can exact revenge on his behalf. Though granted a second life, Wei Wuxian is not free from his first, nor the mysteries that appear before him now. Yet this time, he'll face it all with the righteous and esteemed Lan Wangji at his side, another powerful cultivator whose unwavering dedication and shared memories of their past will help shine a light on the dark truths that surround them.

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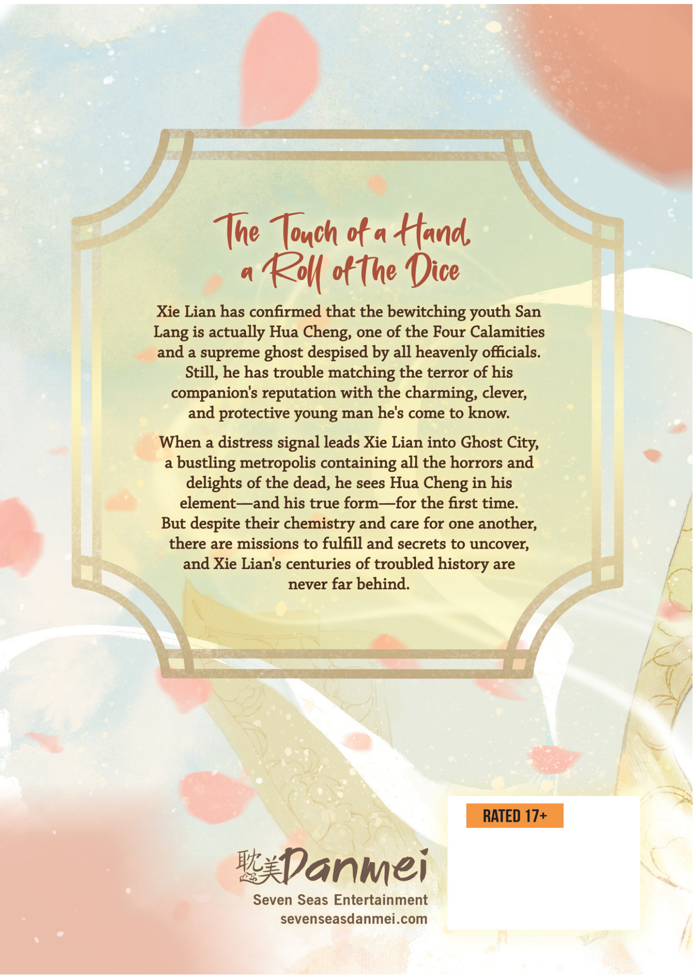

The Touch of a Hand, a Roll of the Dice

Xie Lian has confirmed that the bewitching youth San Lang is actually Hua Cheng, one of the Four Calamities and a supreme ghost despised by all heavenly officials. Still, he has trouble matching the terror of his companion's reputation with the charming, clever, and protective young man he's come to know.

When a distress signal leads Xie Lian into Ghost City, a bustling metropolis containing all the horrors and delights of the dead, he sees Hua Cheng in his element—and his true form—for the first time. But despite their chemistry and care for one another, there are missions to fulfill and secrets to uncover, and Xie Lian's centuries of troubled history are never far behind.

RATED 17+

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